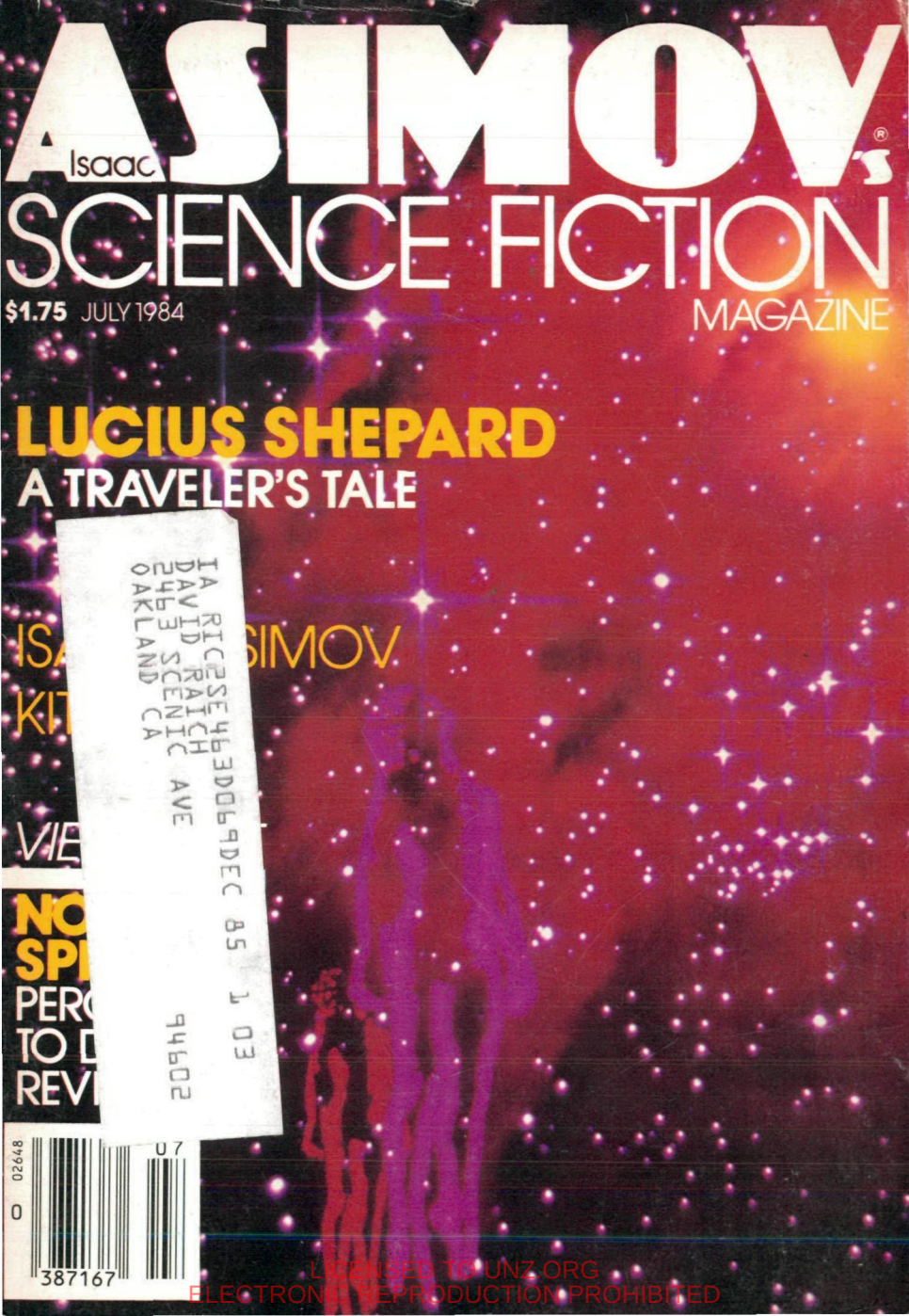

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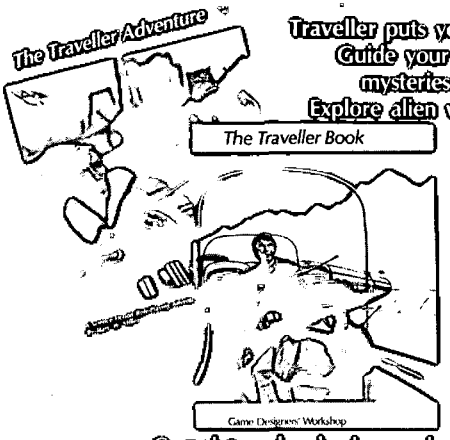

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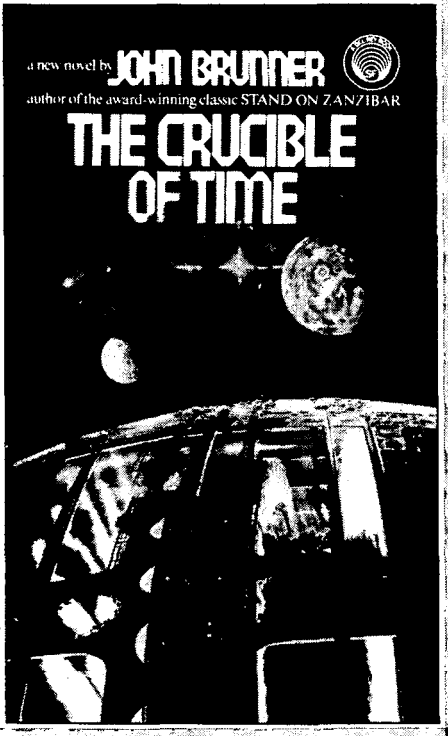

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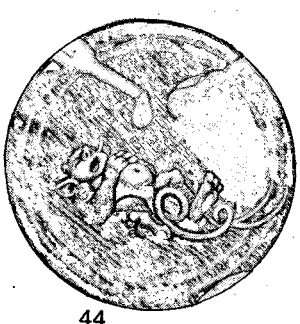

44

Isaac ASIMOV's SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

Vol. 8 No. 7 (whole no. 80)
July 1984
Next issue on sale
July 3, 1984

Novella

120 A Traveler's Tale ____ Lucius Shepard

Novelette

66 A Star is Born ____ Michael Cassutt

Short Stories

28 The Road to Mandalay ____ Martin Gardner
44 Writing Time ____ Isaac Asimov
57 The Bride of Bigfoot ____ Kit Reed
91 Heart's Desire ____ Warren Wagar
103 The Random Man ____ Marc Laidlaw
108 The Assemblage of Kristin ____ James Morrow

Departments

6 Editorial: Bypass ____ Isaac Asimov
12 Letters ____
26 Gaming ____ Dana Lombardy
29 Mooney's Module ____ Gerry Mooney
32 Viewpoint: Perchance to Dream, Revisited ____ Norman Spinrad
170 On Books ____ Baird Searles
178 The SF Conventional Calendar ____ Erwin S. Strauss

Poems by Hope Athearn and Robert Frazier

Cover art for "A Traveler's Tale" by Steven Hunt

Joel Davis: President & Publisher Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director Shawna McCarthy: Editor

Published 13 times a year by Davis Publications, Inc. at $1.75 per copy, Jan.-Dec. issues, $1.95 Special Mid-Dec. issue; annual subscription of thirteen issues $19.50 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $24.20, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 1933, Marion, OH 43305. Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc. 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc.

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Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send form 3579 to IAsfm, Box 1933, Marion OH 43306. In Canada return to 625 Monmouth Rd., Windsor, Ontario N8Y3L1. ISSN 0162-2188.

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EDITORIAL

BYPASS

by Isaac Asimov

In recent years, it had occurred to me now and then that I was getting to be enough of a minor celebrity to qualify for the "Milestone" column in *Time*. To be sure, I was quite certain it would be the kind of milestone I wouldn't live to see, but I was wrong.

In the January 2, 1984 issue, the "Milestone" column contained an item that went as follows: "HOSPITALIZED. *Isaac Asimov,* 63, sci-fi (sic) and nonfiction word factory, with 286 books to his credit and 14 more at his publishers; resting comfortably after triple-bypass heart surgery; in New York City."

Well, I'm not sure how comfortably I was resting at the time, but I'm home now and, within four weeks of the operation, back at my typewriter and word-processer. I'd better tell you the story—at least the part you're not likely to read elsewhere.

Ever since my mild heart attack back in May of 1977, I had suffered from mild and stable angina. For the most part I hardly had occasion to notice it. But then, in August 1983, there was a sudden and unexpected quantum jump in the frequency and intensity of occurrence.

After waiting a couple of months to make sure it wasn't my imagination, I mentioned it with a light laugh to my friendly internist, Paul, who laughed lightly in his turn, twisted my arm firmly behind my back and marched me off to a cardiologist of his acquaintance. The cardiologist laughed lightly and sent me for a stress test, which I failed with total ease.

The next step was an angiogram, which I won't describe, but which showed very clearly exactly if, where, and by how much each of the three coronary arteries were clogged and constricted. My cardiologist then gave me the news. The largest coronary was 85 percent blocked, the second was 70 percent blocked, the third was 100 percent blocked.

"What would you like to do, Isaac?" he asked.

"Triple bypass, Peter," I said, ruefully.

"Very wise decision," said

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Peter. "I will get you the surgeon who performed open-heart surgery on my mother last year."

I'm not an SF/mystery writer for nothing. I saw the flaw in the argument and instantly tested it. "Peter," I said, "do you love your mother?"

"Very much," he said, earnestly.

So I went to see the surgeon, who had that mad glitter in his eyes that all surgeons have and that told me at once that all he wanted in life was to cut tissues, just as all I wanted in life was to pound a keyboard. Monomaniac called to monomaniac over the primeval swamps and we were instantly at home with one another.

He said, "I can slice you up in the second week of December—unless you would prefer to wait till after the holidays."

For a moment, I was in a dilemma. You see, on the Friday nearest January 5 (Sherlock Holmes' birthday) each year, there is the annual banquet of "The Baker Street Irregulars" to honor the great man. The semicentennial banquet was to be on January 6, 1984, and I very much wanted to be there. It has become customary to have me as the last item in the entertainment. I close the banquet with a funny talk and an original Sherlockian song to some well-known tune and it is always well-received, and I enjoy it more than anyone else.

I yearned to postpone the operation till after the banquet—but I dared not. It was "drop-dead time" for me; and I knew it. So I said, "Steve, slice me up at your first opportunity." We set the operation two and a half weeks in the future, on December 14, 1983.

But I was worried. What if a heart attack killed me in the interval? What if I died on the operating table? What would happen to the BSI banquet?

I lay awake worrying about it and realized I had not yet made up my song. I was going to use *Danny Boy* which starts (as you probably know): "Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are caw-awling." All I had worked out was "Oh, Sherlock Holmes" and I realized I needed eight syllables to complete the line and "The Baker Street Irregulars" had eight syllables.

It was 3 A.M. and in almost no time, I had my song. Here it is—two verses, syllable and rhyme-perfect:

Oh, Sherlock Holmes, the Baker Street Irregulars
Are meeting here to honor you today,
For in their hearts you glitter like a thousand stars
And like those stars you'll never pass away.
This year that's new must tick away its months and die,
For Father Time moves on remorselessly.

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But even he can't tarnish as he passes by,
Oh, Sherlock Holmes; oh, Holmes; your immortality.

Oh, Sherlock Holmes, the world is filled with evil still,
And Moriarty rages everywhere.
The terror waits to strike and, by the billions, kill,
The mushroom cloud is more than we can bear.
And yet there's hope in what you've come to symbolize,
In that great principle you've made us see.
And we may live if only we can improvise,
Oh, Sherlock Holmes; oh, Holmes; your rationality.

I slipped out of bed and typed it up, sang it a few times and, a few days later had Janet tape it on one of her cassettes. It was understood that she was to go to the banquet if I could not, and see to it that the tape was played in my absence.

And then in the hospital, the night before the operation, I had a little involuntary fantasy. I imagined myself not surviving the operation and that Janet would arrive at the banquet in deep mourning and make a broken little speech about her beloved husband who had passed away three weeks before but whose last thought was of the BSI, and who had recorded his last song for them on the cassette she held.

Naturally, there would be sniffing and sobbing from all corners of the room, and when Janet turned on the cassette, there would be dead silence from the audience as they strained to catch the last Asimovian notes they would ever hear. And then, as the last note died away, there would be an ovation such as no one had ever heard before. Every Irregular would be applauding, yelling, weeping—and it would go on for twenty minutes. I listened (in fantasy) to every minute of it and was delighted. I never *heard* such a thing.

The next day, December 14, at 1:30 P.M., I was injected with sedatives and tranquilizers and while I remained awake and responsive until they were ready to put me fully under, I have no memory of the next twenty hours. I was told by the doctors afterward, however, that before allowing myself to be anesthetized, I insisted on singing a song about Sherlock Holmes.

At 10 A.M. on December 15, I came to, looked about, realized that I was in the recovery room and had survived. And I said, "Oh, shoot!"

After all, I'm a ham actor, and survival is only survival, but a great ovation's *applause*.

However, sing no sad songs for me. I knew what I had to do. All through the hospital recov-

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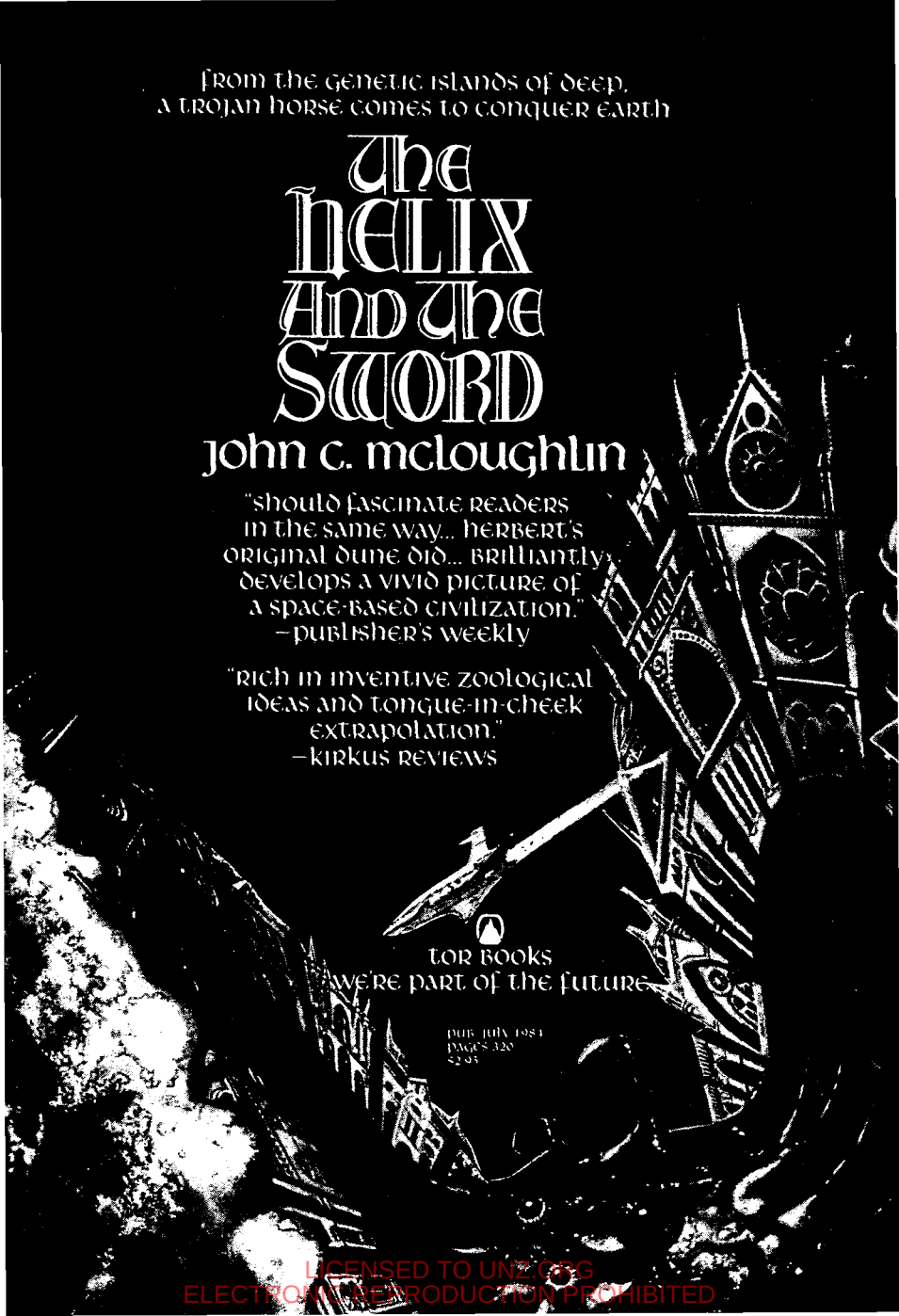
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ery I laid siege to the cardiologist for permission to go to the banquet. He said, "If the weather is reasonable, and if you feel strong enough, all right."

I got out of the hospital on December 31, and held my breath for six days. On the evening of January 6, it was quite mild and there was no precipitation and I felt as strong as a horse. (Not really, but I swore to Janet I did.)

We took a taxi to the hotel, bribing the driver to go slowly, and I got there at the post-dinner intermission. I was at once surrounded by people who were delighted to see me and who lied very nicely and told me how great I looked.

When intermission was over, Julian Wolff, the BSI dictator, put me on at once; and I proceeded to tell the story of my pre-operational fantasy exactly as I have now told it to you, except with all the emotion I could put into my throbbing voice, and finally, when I reached my exclamation of disappointment over having survived, I got the wild, long-contained laugh I was after.

Then I sang my song, and of course, got my ovation, exactly as I knew I would have to, inevitably.

It made all the difference. That was four days ago and I've felt good ever since. I'm even reconciled to survival. ●

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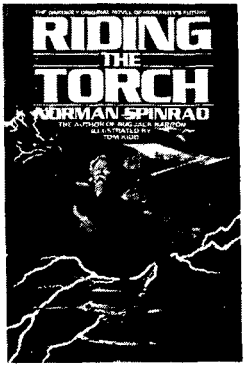

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LETTERS

Dear Sir,

Thank you for writing your editorial on Autographs in the December issue of your magazine. I was at the Worldcon in Baltimore (my first Worldcon) and was appalled at how rude and inconsiderate many of the fans were. Here are a few examples:

I waited in line for your autograph session Friday morning, the one you missed because of scheduling mistakes. Now I was only disappointed and frustrated but some of the other fans were *mad.* When we got in line again for the make-up session, one fan said, "If he doesn't show up today, I'll kill him!" I could tell by the tone of his voice and the furrow of his brow that he was not saying this casually. He was really mad at you, as if you owed him something because he liked your work. I found this hard to believe. Even if you did decide to skip the session (which I would never believe of you) it would still be your privilege to do so. You shouldn't have to give up your right to privacy just because you are the greatest writer in the world.

On another day I walked in on a panel that had just ended. Most of the panelists had left and Frederik Pohl was trying to also. Before he could get up out of his chair, a fan with a box full of at least 20 books caught him and asked him to autograph them all. I've heard Mr. Pohl is a nice man, and I'm sure it was flattering to have such an avid admirer (he was very pleasant as he signed all the books and kept up small talk with the fan as he did it), but I thought that was excessive and rude. I have an ego as big as all outdoors, but I have yet to sell any of my writing so I have nothing to use it on. Perhaps I would enjoy a situation like that if it happened to me, but I rather doubt it.

Finally, I did get your autograph but it was only in the program book because I did not plan very well in advance. I wanted you to sign the first book of yours I ever read (*Pebble in the Sky* when I was in the fifth grade—never mind when) but I guess the point of this letter is to let you know that *your* autograph is meaningful to me even if it is only in the program book. I would also like to apologize for my fellow fans. I'm sure they don't often think about what they say or do.

Jon B. Green

The mixup on Friday was the fault of the Convention Committee. They scheduled me for 11, when I told them plainly the train would not get me in till 12. I don't blame fans for being furious if they thought

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I was absent simply out of indifference or contempt for them—but of course that was not so. And if they had known me a bit better, they would have known I would fail a commitment only for the most legitimate of reasons.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sir:

Martin Gardner (Viewpoint: Great Moments in Pseudo-Science, July 1983, 66-77) wants to insist that "unorthodox theories . . . of science are qualitatively different from" what he classes as pseudo-science. But then he goes on, "this is not to deny that pseudo-science fades along spectrums that lead to reputable science." To me, the attempt to call qualitatively different things that fade into one another along a spectrum involves a logical inconsistency.

Gardner tries to defend that by saying, "day fades into night, but there is a difference between day and night." Commonly, we handle that situation by using different words for those times intermediate between day and night which are not sufficiently close to either one as to be classed with them. We talk of dawn, of first light, of false dawn, and of evening, twilight, and dusk. If Mr. Gardner were to avail himself of terms for situations lying between acknowledged science and proven pseudo-science, those who admire his writing and benefit from it might increase in number.

Henry H. Bauer
Dean
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University
Blacksburg, VA

The appropriate term I have frequently heard used is "the scientific fringe." Continental drift was once on the fringe and it moved inward; phrenology was once on the fringe and it fell out. You can't always tell what will happen to items on the fringe, but you still know in from out—which is exactly what Gardner says.

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. A;

I love the magazine, have since the first quarterly issues appeared, and have *always* been a particular fan of yours. I won't specify the length of my "always."

I write many letters, but never to magazines. In this case, however, I just *had* to break out the old IBM model 'B' (circa 1960) standard—and away we go. . .

In agitated response to the Viewpoint debate of November/December; Fantasy-vs-Science Fiction:

I realize that the point of such a "debate" (from the perspective of the opponents) is to best one's adversary. I will devote little space to discussion of tactics, morals, etc. (usually questionable, at best, and this no exception); but I wonder greatly at the recurrent theme of the December Author (I refuse to advertise)—to wit, sexism. He would seem to apply this toward anyone (especially the November Author) who disagrees with him. I don't follow there. It would seem to require quite a "sexist" (I dislike the term in the first place) mind to conceive of such an idea, much less to use it as a weapon against all comers.

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He also makes a large point (and an equally large error) of equating fantasies (i.e. daydreams, etc), with "Fantasy" (ie. the Genre), thereby showing proof that "Fantasy" is a physically necessary part of life. Evidently, SF is not (nor any other form of fiction, but these are not under the scope). I would be happy to replace the "Fantasy" with a more generalized "fiction," to call the point moot, and leave it at that.

In many ways, we are comparing apples and oranges here (sorry if that phrase seems a bit worn); in an equal number of ways, we are comparing the products of AB & BA. All fiction is extrapolation. Fantasy is ancient; true. But how mind-reeling, when your technology consists of an ax and sword and man-drawn plow, to dream of flying horses and aura-protected swords. Is it coincidental that the history of S.F. parallels that of the development of "Modern Science"? Please. . . . Now we simply dream of fusion powered spacecraft, and the difference is only one of degrees. Is it coincidental that the resurgence of fantasy strikes at a time which is full of self-doubt (technologically speaking), of "Back-to-the-woods-ers"? Please. . . .

What *is* Fantasy? What *is* Science Fiction? We all begin with the requisite definition of terms, and conveniently define them to suit our arguments.

Instead of choosing 'twixt SF and Fant., and thereby eliminating only 50% of the possibilities, why not take a tip from Ted's law? Since 90% of anything is crap, let us stick with the 10% that remains, and can be labeled (if you *insist* on being able to label) as something truly unorthodox—"Quality." I believe *everyone* can recognize *that* as being a subjective label.

I haven't mentioned my sex; I, for one, don't see it as being germane (in *this* regard, you understand). And, if you can't tell "which side I'm on"—then I've accomplished my objective, at least in part.

I realize this debate was all in good fun, and I try not to take myself too seriously either, so I welcome any comments directed to the address below.

Loyally,

L. McNallie
P.O. Box 1000-287590
Steilacoom, WA 98388

It seems to me that you're trying to lump together science-based fantasy and pre-science-based fantasy. They're really two different things. Pre-science-based fantasy never changes; elves and sorcerers are as elvish and sorcerish as they were two thousand years ago. Science-based fantasy, however, changes with science. Spaceships accelerating to a million miles per second went out with Einstein. The Martian canals went out with the Mars-probes and so on. All fiction is extrapolation, yes—but in different ways.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Ms. McCarthy, and all other Gentlebeings:

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I hope this is of help in ending the battle of the mailing label.

David R. Moffatt
Pine City, MN

Excellent. A constructive suggestion.

—Isaac Asimov

Ms. McCarthy,

As I read the December issue of your magazine I realized something, I didn't like what I was reading. In fact, when I stop and think about it, I really haven't liked what I've read in your magazine for the last few months. I really can't say exactly what it is I don't like about the stories in *IAsfm;* but I will try. As I look back over the last five issues only a few stories impress me as being exceptional. They were, "The Glitch" by Britton Bloom, "Saving Humanity" by Isaac Asimov, and "Transit" by Vonda N. McIntyre (probably the best story to appear in any science fiction magazine all year).

Why I liked these stories I really don't know. Maybe it was because they weren't depressing or as downbeat as many of your magazine stories have been lately. "The Peacemaker" by Gardner Dozois (August, 1983) is a story that I didn't really care for. Whether it was because it dealt with religious cults or natural disaster, I don't know. Maybe it's because I grew up reading such works as *The Legions of Space* series by Jack Williamson, or Heinlein's action-packed books, and even Asimov's robots. I'm not saying that I prefer the older writers to today's, but some of the writers that have appeared in your magazine seem to put characterization, scenery, and style (all important elements) ahead of telling a good story. And I think that is what Bloom, Asimov, and McIntyre did in their stories: they told a good story.

David Collins
Greeley, PA

I know what you mean. I grew up on "The Legion of Space," too, but you and I were teenagers, then, and so were almost all the readers of SF. The average age of the readership has increased since then, and tastes change. Also literary styles and the social milieu have changed. And there's nothing gaffers like you and I can do but try to adapt.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac Asimov,

My name is Richard Preman, and I am writing to you in behalf of all of the SF fans that are locked

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away in the prison system. I have been in prison for three years and I must say that your magazine has helped in making the time I have to do easier. I have been a SF fan all of my life and I have enjoyed the many worlds and wonders of SF. Recently I wrote a letter to your magazine explaining that I am in prison and that I am trying to form a SF club for the general population of the prison. To my surprise I received a reply stating that *IAsfm* and *Analog* back issues will be donated to our SF club. I must say that in a world of selfishness such an offer is a wonder, and I am glad that there are people who still care about people. I want to thank Sheila Williams for her contribution and the recommendation for a SF club. I would like to say that her letter was extremely helpful in our achievement of forming the SF club. I will be transferred out of this prison to another one and I intend to form an SF club there also. I will be starting my subscription to your magazine this coming Christmas! Therefore I would like for you to reply to me via mail and through *IAsfm* so that all of the other incarcerated men & women out there know that one among us has finally done what should have been done a long time ago. Further I would like to add that if I had not been sent to prison, I might never have found that your magazine existed. I have enjoyed your magazine and I find the stories extremely well written and very exciting.

Thank You Sincerely,

Richard A. Preman
P.O. Box-43
Norfolk, MA 02056

We are glad to help all we can. For most prisoners, the condition is a temporary one and to reasonable people, rehabilitation is a more satisfactory purpose for imprisonment than punishment is. If science fiction can aid in rehabilitation, then that is one more score in our favor.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov
and Ms. McCarthy;

Thank you for a very enjoyable magazine. I read every one from cover to cover (even Martin Gardner's mindbenders, although I'm insufficiently mathematical to ever have much of an idea of even how to start solving most of them. I thought the Momeaters would be an exception, but they proved also to be mathematical rather than biological!). The interval between finishing one issue and receiving the next is always far too long—the contribution of the Canadian Post Office to its actual length aside. I read a lot of books, but short stories are not too available except in magazines such as yours. So I feel very strongly that you are providing a very important service in making the shorter works of so many good writers available to the reading public.

Being something of a fantasy nut, I beg to differ with those readers who object to stories even faintly fantasy-flavoured. There are some of us out here who love them! Personally, I like to see a variety of styles and themes, and your editing is providing that very nicely, thank you.

I do have one small quibble.

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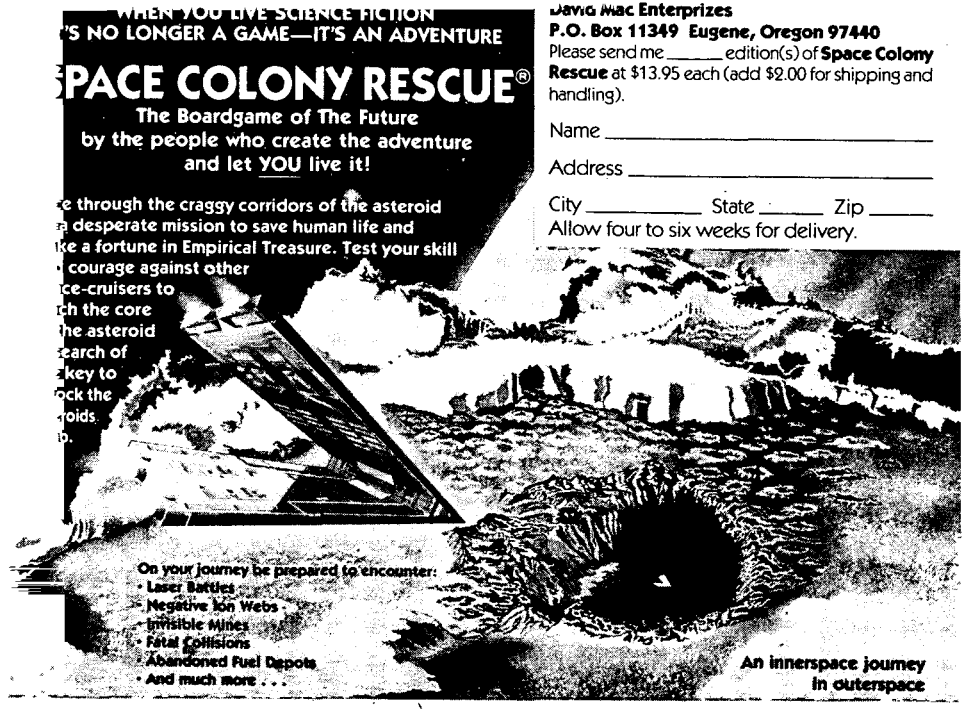
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Could you *please* put the "On Books" and "Letters" back in their original places at the beginning and end of the magazine respectively? To me, the book column is like an appetizer before the main course of stories, with the letters and Dr. Asimov's delightful comebacks for dessert at the end. I find the present arrangement very disrupting, and flipping back and forth to read them in the preferred order is not entirely satisfactory either.

Sincerely yours,

Mrs. Laura Lee Life
Charlie Lake, BC
Canada

Perhaps it's a matter of attitude. The editorial has always been at the front of the magazine. Why not consider the editorial and the letters all one thing: an Asimov monolog and an Asimov dialog? Then consider the reviews the dessert. You have had a lot of good reading and now some consideration of additional good reading that might exist outside the magazine.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

It's good to be back as a regular reader of *IAsfm,* after about two years without your magazine. Financial reverses were responsible for my not renewing my subscription, which was really hard for me as I was a charter member.

However, my life is once again in good enough shape for me to subscribe (and I might note that after 46 years of life in Michigan I am now living and working in California) but I find myself at something of a loss when I read the "Letters

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to the Editor." I seem to have come into the middle of a controversy over sex and violence in SF. While I'm not sure what started this discussion, I certainly have an opinion to contribute.

As a lifelong avid reader, I have noticed that a good story does not need or depend on sex. Indeed, when sex figures prominently in a story, that story is almost invariably weak in some area, and that area is usually plot. What Harold Robbins and Sidney Sheldon write is, to me, trash, and I don't waste my time reading them any more.

As for violence, I believe it was you, sir, who said "Violence is the last resort of the incompetent." I totally agree with that, and I feel that violence is too easily accepted in our society. Better we should accept sex, which is a natural function of all living creatures. Violence may also be natural to mankind, but I believe it is a negative attribute, and one we should strive to eliminate, not glorify.

So record my vote as no on sex and violence, but especially violence; if I have to choose, better sex than violence.

On a personal level, I would like to comment on the general run of "Letters, etc." I enjoy reading the Letters column, but I heartily dislike those letters from readers who presume to critique a particular issue of a magazine. I find it boring. I'd prefer to read letters that cite a particular story and tell why it was especially liked or disliked.

In closing, may I point out that I am writing this on a Digital WT 78 Word Terminal, and am delighted to be able to do so. I am soon going to turn 48, and I feel I'm living an SF story come true. The word processor is the only way to type, and I'm very fortunate to work in an office that utilizes one. (I work for a firm of Civil Engineers; we also have a large IBM, a small Hewlett-Packard, and an Apple II.) I am delighted to be living in the Computer Age!

Sincerely,

Kathleen Hodgkinson
6957 Fairman
Lakewood, CA 90713

To explain— We are not talking about gratuitous sex and violence designed to attract those who want the titillation. We are talking about sex and violence in moderate degree where those are essential to the point that the author is trying to make. Even though I agree that violence is something we should try to eliminate, it may be necessary to look at that which we want to eliminate, to see why and how it should be eliminated.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Shawna, and Company:

The October issue was the best in five or six months. I was almost ready to cancel my subscription. In the last five or six months there were only three or five stories worth reading. I did force myself to read them all because it sometimes takes a while to get into a story.

The October issue had no Science Fact articles (if I want non-fiction I'll read a non-fiction mag.), no opinion of an author on non-SF subjects, and no poems. Just one good story after another.

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And then came the November issue. More good stories. "The Gospel According to Gamaliel Crucis" by Michael Bishop took a while (2 or 3 pages) to get into but, worth the effort. I feel that the departments on Gaming and the Crossword Puzzle are wasted, but, if you limit them to one or two pages I won't yell too loud. And of course the Editorial is always great (or at least interesting).
Sincerely,

Larry Margolis
Oregon City, OR

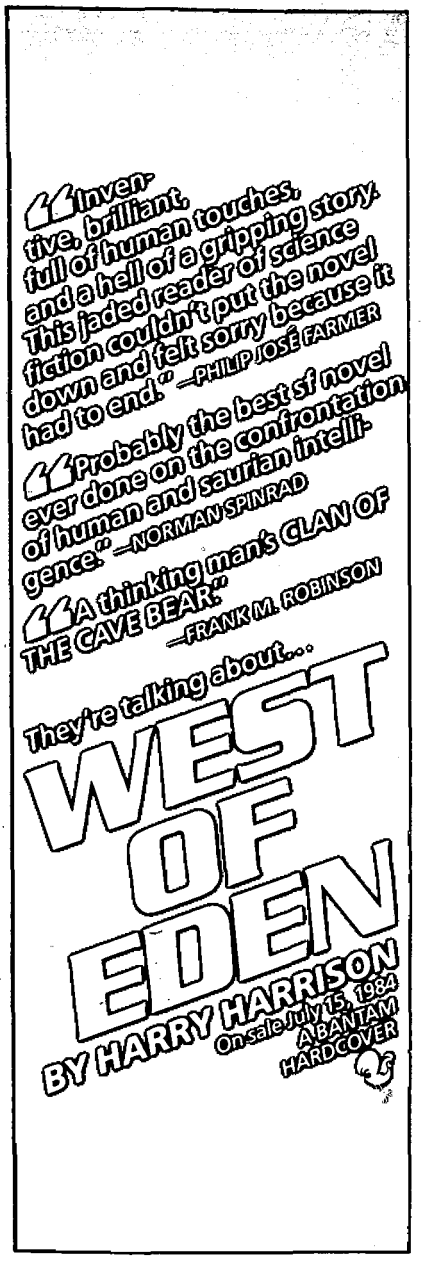
Keep your eye and concentration firmly on the things you like. As for the others, tell yourself that other people like those. The reward of variety is that you please a great many people to some extent; the penalty of variety is that you please very few all the way.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Editors,

First, I would like to say that it's stories like "Remembering Siri" (Dec. '83) that make reading worth while. I enjoy your whole magazine and rarely put it down before I've read the whole thing. But "Remembering Siri" is one of the most imaginative, touching, and excellently written stories I've had the pleasure of reading in many moons. Thank you, Dan Simmons. I think he is absolutely watch-out-he's-here status.

In all the letters I've read in your magazine, I've never seen one praise the wonderful work of Martin Gardner. I love his sections. In fact, I read them first. My dad has been a math teacher since before I was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born and I grew up loving math. Martin's problems are not only great stories, but they're great fun to try and solve (I say try, because he stumps me more than I care to admit). My dad enjoys them, too.

Now, to the fun part. You said before the Viewpoint in the Nov. '83 issue that we would either get angry or stand up and cheer. Well—I'm not cheering. At first, I was too stunned to be angry. I just couldn't believe some honest-to-goodness person could actually feel that way. Platt acts as though reality is the only way to survive, and that fantasies are deadly and if you like them you belong in a mental institution. The more I thought about it, though, the angrier I got. It's a good thing my husband was at work and my kids at school or they'd have committed me. (I'm not in the habit of jumping up and down and shouting defiances at a magazine.) Let me tell you, my husband and I own a store and I run it. I deal with customers, delivery men, sales people, and paying bills, along with my duties as wife and mother. I've got reality running out of my ears! When I go home and want to relax and read, the *last* thing I want is more reality! I want to escape, not just to another time or place (plain fiction could do that) but to another planet or another dimension. Somewhere that doesn't even resemble reality. And I not only like to get there on a spaceship, but I like to fly from place to place on a bronze dragon, too or walk on a world that's miles and miles of sand while watching for gigantic sand worms. Hey! That's not reality, that's fantasy! If someone took away my dreams and fantasies of what I may do, or where I may go (though most are impossible, at least for the present), I would sink and be forever lost in realism. BRAVO! Piers Anthony for "In Defense of Fantasy." I hope he and others like him keep writing all their stories. And I hope the Platts of this world never take over, or it'll be a dull world indeed. BRAVO *IAsfm* for printing both sides and giving readers a chance to voice their opinions.

An SF fan
Fort Worth, TX

Thank you for your vote, but we know there will never be agreement, and those on the other side will be just as firm and resolute. As for Martin Gardner, he is one of my favorite people on Earth and I assure you he gets lots *of praise from many readers.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

I recently read John Varley's *Millennium,* which was reviewed in the December 1983 issue of *IAsfm,* and found it very interesting. But what is even more interesting is that I found a story in a back issue of *IAsfm* that is exactly like *Millennium*; it is titled "Air Raid" by Herb Boehm and appeared in the Spring 1977 issue of *IAsfm.* The characters and situation are really the same, and parts of the story even appear word-for-word in the book.

I can't understand how the two

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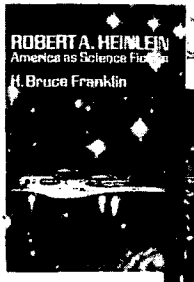

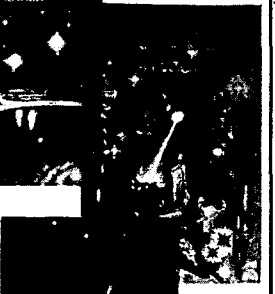

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can be so much alike. I would appreciate your comments.

Carol Szatkowski
Wilmington, DE

Herb Boehm, as it happens, was a pseudonym of John Varley, and "Air Raid" was a portion of "Millennium." Now you see how the two can be so much alike. There was no hanky-panky.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

I don't write letters to the editor. I realize that there are those who make a "living" out of seeing their letters in print and massaging their egoes.

In spite of all that I had to write this letter to you about "Street Meat" by Norman Spinrad. This is the best thing to hit science fiction since *A Clock Work Orange* to which it owes a great debt. No one can now accuse science fiction of lacking a sense of importance. I'll be going back to this story time and time again as a turning point and seminal influence. "Street Meat" is science fiction growing up, joining the big boys.

I know that the so-called "good people" out there will complain about the pessimism, the language, the situations, etc. etc. They of the narrow mind were warned by your foreword, although I really object to your feeling the necessity to print such a warning. It reminded me of that buyer-beware notice that the Air Force forced upon Kubrick for *Dr. Strangelove.* I found, in both cases, that it was an insult to your intelligence.

I expect to see and read more of Spinrad. I might even renew my subscription (to make up for all those who will be cancelling theirs in righteous smugness). And yes, I would let my daughter read this but she is a little young to marry Spinrad.

Sincerely yours,

Walter R. Schillinger
Oak Park, IL

I think a warning is fair. The whole purpose of "blurbs" is to whet the readers' appetites; and if it's reasonable to try to lure readers into reading a story, I think it's reasonable to warn them against reading a story, if we think some might not be able to take it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov &
Shawna McCarthy,

A year ago this October I wrote a letter to the editor (you) about a dilemma that I had. Briefly, that I had been looking all over the place for some old issues of this magazine. The letter appeared in last July's issue.

At this point I would like you and the readers of the magazine to know the results of that letter. I have received numerous letters from people throughout the United States and some from overseas, one coming from New Zealand. To make a long story short, after some correspondence I now have been able to read the issues that I was missing.

I am keeping correspondence with some of the people and have initiated some new friendships thanks

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to your magazine. I feel that people who read science fiction and your magazine in particular must have some bond in common. They are open to friendship and open to share their magazines so that someone else may read what they are lacking.

Thanks to all of you, the editors and the readers.

Yours truly,

John E. Folson
Covelo, California

You have discovered something that we dinosaurs of science fiction, who have been reading SF for half a century or so, have known for decades. Welcome to the brotherhood. (I mean siblinghood, of course, but I can't quite bring myself to use the word.)

—Isaac Asimov

Editor's Note:
Please put away your pen and paper. We know this issue is a quarter of an inch shorter than all previous IAsfms. *Future issues will continue with these dimensions, but we promise you we won't be cutting down on our stories. In fact, we will be changing to a slightly smaller type size so that the same amount of material (if not slightly more) will fit into each issue.*

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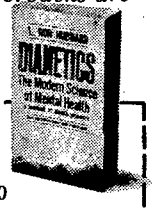

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

This month, I'll finish answering the questions and comments received from the readers who participated in the survey in the October 1983 *IAsfm*.

". . . You might consider a column devoted to GM-ing (Game Mastering). Also, don't forget *RuneQuest*®, *Call of Cthulhu*, etc. They may be lesser known than the traditional hack-n-slash *AD&D*® *(Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*®*)*, however, you are reaching a lot of people who may be interested in role-playing but are put off by games that play like bad fantasy books. *RuneQuest*® and *Cthulhu* have a lot more depth and consistency than *AD&D*®, and are less sexist than a lot of games. . . . P.S. I can't overemphasize how great conventions are—even beginners should go," says C.S., Costa Mesa, CA.

The correspondent brings up several good points, the most important being that role-playing games can be made enjoyable or boring for players by the GM—the Game Master referee.

How do you get to be a good GM? How do you design an interesting and challenging adventure to present to your group of adventurers?

A good scenario or adventure takes many hours to design: draw the map(s), populate the "world" you've created with creatures and artifacts, and invent an interesting plot with just the right amount of danger and complications without making it impossible for the group of players to accomplish its mission and survive to play with those characters again.

This is like writing a great short story or novelette every few weeks! Since this would be impossible, the publishers of role-playing games also produce a series of ready-to-play adventure modules. This enables the players to get involved in a scenario quickly, with a minimum of preparation.

This doesn't mean a GM can't inject his or her personal style or information from previous adventures to continue a campaign. However, having these ready-to-play adventures available means you can enjoy role-playing regularly without constant design work. When you're

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considering buying a new role-playing system, check the box to see if it has any starter scenarios with the rules, and ask the sales clerk if there are any modules available for the game.

One more thought about a good GM: It's easy for a referee to fall into the trap of thinking he or she is playing *against* the players in the adventure party.

It's too easy for a GM to stack the scenario against the players—load it with powerful monsters, or too many devious traps, etc. A GM may enjoy eliminating an entire group of players, but after a few such sessions, those gamers probably won't participate in that GM's adventures, and may become disenchanted with role-playing altogether.

Several knowledgeable gamers have told me the best GMs are somewhat like bards who unfold the story—the scenario—to the players, and hold their interest through the use of just enough danger and mystery to suit the ages of the players and their characters.

Finally, C.S. mentions conventions, and I heartily agree. Try one! You may not like everything, but there's so much variety at a con you're likely to find something to broaden your contacts and interests in SF and fantasy.

"I would consider a listing of game award winners very valuable. Just as in science fiction writings, award-winning titles deserve to be noted," comments S.S., South Farmingdale, NY.

I also received letters that disagreed with this. Several readers felt it was the obligation of publishers to publicize their awards because they stand to gain from this kind of exposure. However, the reason I list the award winners in this column is most of the SF game publishers are still unknown to many of the readers of *IAsfm*. These small firms would remain unknown were it not for specialty gaming magazines and columns like this one. I feel it's my duty to inform you about these companies, especially when they produce SF games that win awards.

". . . How about fictión that can be used in games (role-playing)? Original fiction or storylines with a section that enables you to convert the characters, etc., to a gaming situation," says G.J., Pine Bluffs, WY.

This is a great idea, but writing original fiction is not my forte. However, some established authors are converting their own material or giving permission to one of the game companies to do so.

Finally, to all of you who asked for listings of game conventions, game magazines, and play-by-mail games, I'm working on these projects and you'll see the results. ●

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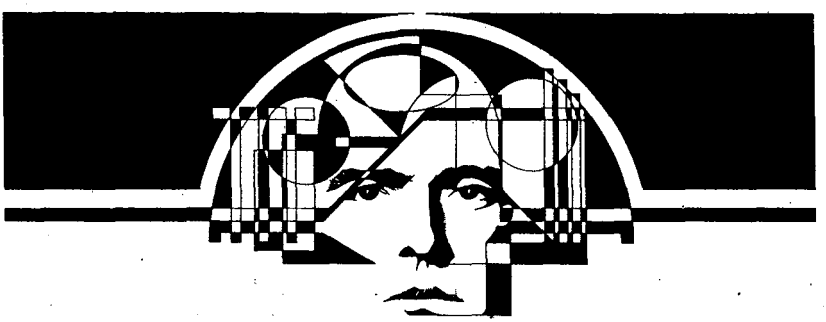
MARTIN GARDNER

THE ROAD TO MANDALAY



On the road to Mandalay,
Where the flyin' finches play.

The twenty-lane thruway was crowded with cars and trucks, all rolling at speeds of about 200 km an hour. The sun had just set, and here and there drivers were starting to turn on their headlights. There was no danger of collisions because each car and truck was controlled by a powerful computer, aided by sophisticated sensory devices.

I had been driving since noon through Texas and Oklahoma, headed east for my home town of Mandalay. Mandalay? It's a drowsy little village of cotton farmers, 35 km southwest of Blytheville, Arkansas. I had finished my freshman year at the University of Arizona, planning to major in mathematics, and was on my way home for the summer.

The car I drove, named the Hustle, was made by robots in Hong Kong, and equipped with the most advanced talking computer on the international car market. To avoid motel bills I planned to drive all night. After a brief nap, while the car took over steering, I adjusted the dials on the computer console to give the Hustle access to its vast memory bank of logic and math problems.

"I'm in no mood for music," I said. "Would you mind tossing me

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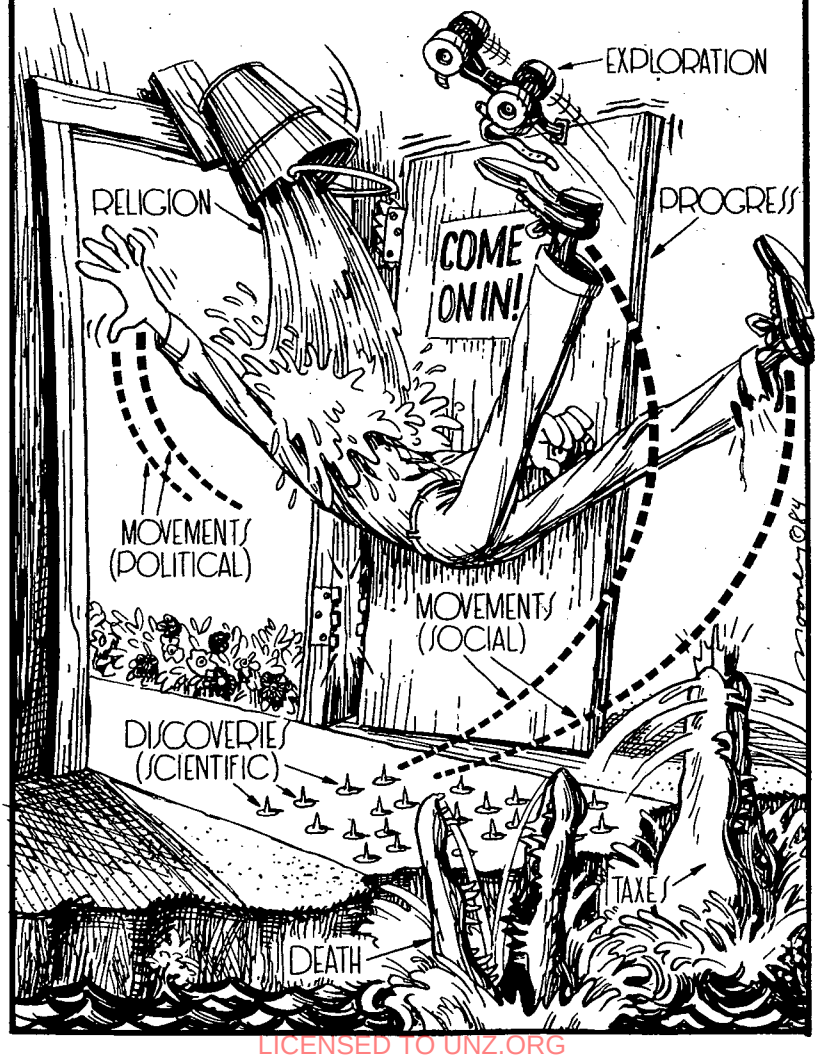
A SCHOLARLY AND REASONED OVERVIEW OF

How History Works



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some puzzles simple enough to work on in my head?"

"You know I don't mind," said the car. "I'm programmed to do whatever you like—assuming, of course, I'm capable."

At that moment a flock of sparrows flew over the car, producing three white splotches on the windshield.

"How annoying," said the car. "But before I clean the windshield, observe that those three spots mark the corners of a triangle with sides close to the ratios of three, four, and five."

"By Euclid, you're right!"

"Which has the larger area? A triangle with sides of three, four, five, or a triangle with sides of 300, 400, and 700?"

"The second one, naturally."

"Wrong!" the car shot back, following its exclamation with an infuriating metallic chuckle. "The second triangle is degenerate. It's a straight line. The area is *zero.*"

"Okay, okay, pal," I said. "I didn't stop to think. Let's have another one. And please—no cackling if I miss."

I was able to solve most of the car's brain teasers. Here are some I either couldn't crack or I answered incorrectly. Maybe you can do better. The questions should be answered without using pencil, paper, or calculator—and remember, the car's a hustler.

1. "Take a look at my digital clock," said the car. "It shows eight o'clock. How many times will the numeral five appear on the clock between now and nine?"

2. "How many times, between noon and midnight, will the clock show at least three digits that are alike? They don't have to be adjacent."

3. After calling my attention to a strong wind against which we were traveling, the car said: "Suppose we drive on a straight thruway at a steady speed, from A to B, against a head wind of constant speed. Then we drive from B to A at the same speed, with the same wind at our back. Will we make the round trip in a longer or shorter time than if there were no wind at all?"

(Because the car's speed would be slowed in one direction by the same amount it would be boosted while going the other way, I wrongly guessed the times to be equal.)

4. "Suppose you have to stop and change a flat," said the car. "As you know, each of my wheels has four nuts. You put the nuts on the ground. While you're unlocking the spare, a squirrel steals all four nuts. What's the best way to get me safely to the nearest garage?"

5. "For 10,000 km, assume you rotate my tires so I make equal use of all five. How many kilometers of wear does each tire suffer?"

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6. "Suppose you and a friend in another car started on this trip at the same time in Tucson. He never exceeds the speed limit, and we follow behind him for the entire trip. Could we get ticketed for speeding?"

7. When we passed a farm with a square fence around it, the car asked a question that seemed so easy I wanted to kick myself for flubbing it. "If the farm has a perimeter of 400 meters, 100 on each side, and the farmer put up a fence post every ten meters, how many posts did he use?"

8. After paying at a toll bridge, the car asked: "What's the largest number of coins that won't change a dollar bill?" I guessed eleven—three quarters, four dimes, and four pennies.

9. "And you plan to be a mathematician?" said the car. "Maybe you can do better on this one. What's the *smallest* number of coins that *will* change a dollar bill if you obey the rule that no coin of the same value can be used an even number of times. For example, you can't use two halves or four quarters."

Try your best on each question before looking at the answers on page 89.

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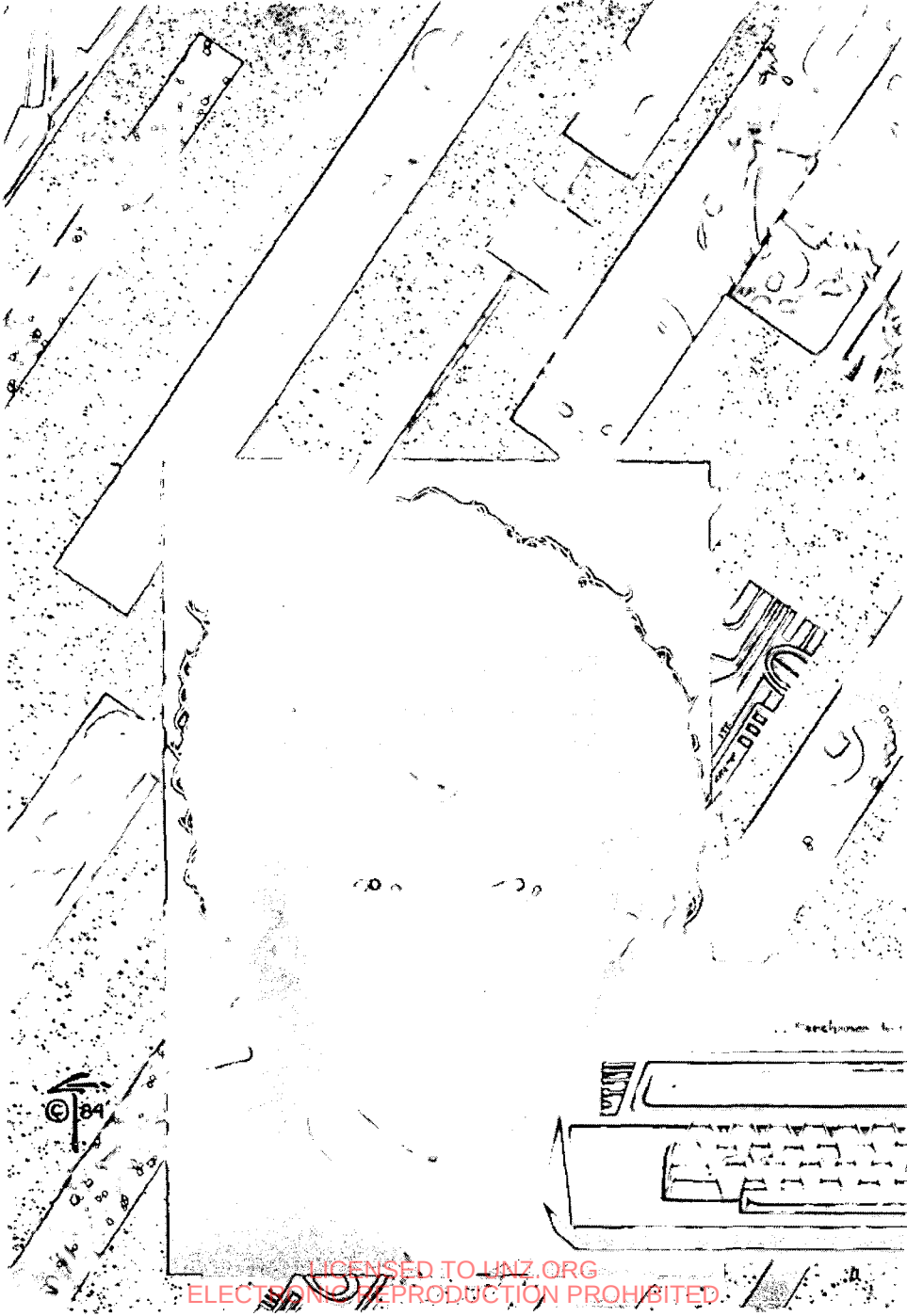

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VIEWPOINT

PERCHANCE TO DREAM, REVISITED

by Norman Spinrad

art: Gary Freeman

We'd like to thank all our readers who responded to Norman Spinrad's short story "Perchance to Dream" (*IAsfm*, June 1983) with thoughtful and informative letters. These letters were the inspiration for the fascinating article that follows.

Since my experiment with dream-writing, "Perchance To Dream," was published in the June 1983 issue of *Asimov's*, I have received about three dozen letters from readers generated by the story, more mail in a shorter period of time than on anything else I've published, including novels. Many of these letters are interesting and thought-provoking indeed.

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VIEWPOINT

However, there are simply far too many of them for me to answer each individually, and besides no doubt many of these letter-writers would be interested in what some of the other letters said; so, with apologies to all for not writing personally, I'll try as best I can to summarize herein what has emerged in the way of reader response to this experiment.

To briefly refresh your memories, I had a dream in which I was explaining how a Waffen SS unit was defeated by American glider commandos on or about D-Day, due to the fact that the German troops had had a fear-engram implanted in them by a film the day before which happened to key in to the cobra-insignia on the American gliders. I attempted to "re-enter" the dream at the typewriter, and "watched" more and more fine details emerge as I wrote out what seemed to be appearing dreamlike and spontaneously from my own internal void. Later, I had another dream in which the last surviving books after a nuclear holocaust were threatened with destruction by rain. I awoke, went to the bathroom, and discovered that a water-leak was just starting to soak some books that I had stored in a cabinet above the toilet.

The D-Day dream involved Otto Skorzeny, a German glider commando leader who once rescued Mussolini from the Allies; an old German movie involving thuggees and deadly cobras; details of German troop deployment on D-Day; and various other details of a military engagement (see the June 1983 *Asimov's*). As an experiment, I invited readers to reply with any specific information that might prove or disprove any correspondence between my dream and actual events on or about D-Day.

Of the more than 30 letters I received, only two, from R.J. Crabtree and Dan C. Duval, were directly about D-Day, Skorzeny and his men, and glider unit engagements. According to both of these letters, which seemed quite authoritative and detailed, Skorzeny was not in France

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on D-Day, but there is no reliable way of knowing whether or not any of the troops who had taken part in the Mussolini rescue mission might or might not have been attached to units in the area. All the American glider units that took part in the invasion were drawn from the 101st and 82nd Airborne divisions, neither of which had a cobra as part of its divisional insignia. However as Mr. Duval and others pointed out, cobra motifs were very common on both sides as small-unit insignia and most of these small-unit insignia were not recorded.

According to both Duval and Crabtree, the closest SS unit to the front, the 12th SS Panzer Hitler Jugend Division, was about 70 km from the nearest American landing zone, which may or may not have been close enough to encounter an off-course American glider unit. However, Mr. Duval suggests that it might have been possible for some of the Canadian elements of the British 6th Airborne Division to have been in a wayward glider that could have encountered elements of the 12th SS Panzer Division. He also points out that SS units were stationed throughout the Reich as security, police, and counter-guerilla troops, and that the locations of all these small SS units at the time would be almost impossible to ascertain from existing records.

No one seemed to know of any German film about a cobra assassin cult, but Crabtree did mention a film called *The Cobra Woman* which might have fit the description of the film in the dream, though it was an American film made in 1944.

And that is the extent of the confirmation or refutation of the real-world correspondence to details of the dream, for which I am most grateful, though the results would seem, at best, to be highly equivocal.

But what of all those other letters? "Perchance To Dream" seemed to have touched a sensitive place in a lot of people. About a dozen letters, many of them long and detailed, concerned

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themselves with various theories of the nature and content of dreams in general and my dream in particular. These ranged from interesting explications of Jung's concept of the collective unconscious as it relates to dream imagery and content, to explanations based on Scientology, to the notion of dreams as precognition, to dreams as unconscious telepathic communication, to dreams as "alternate realities" in the Dick-ian sense, to straightforward spiritualism.

About a dozen other letters, perhaps most interesting of all, related the writers' own experiences with the intersection between dreams and waking reality. Many of these letters stated that "Perchance To Dream" had given the writers the courage to relate their strange experiences, seeing as how I had been willing to commit mine to public print. [*In view of the highly personal nature of these letters, their authors will be identified only by their initials. S.Mc.*] Some of these experiences are challenging indeed, particularly to the recurring theory that dreams are merely the brain's way of clearing "noise" out of the storage system and are therefore "meaningless" and not connected to events in the "real world."

Several letters related experiences with dreams that later proved to be explicitly precognitive and in all these cases, the letter writers expressed a previous reluctance to discuss these dreams for fear of being thought "weird"; indeed, for the most part they tried to discount them even to themselves. A woman dreamt of a specific room in a specific house with a specific family and a specific man. Six years later, she was in that room in that house with that family and the man who was to become her husband. Another woman, as a schoolgirl, dreamt that a sister of a friend had moved from her home into a trailer across town. When she told the friend of her dream, the friend laughed. But the next morning the sister told the friend that she was moving across town into a trailer

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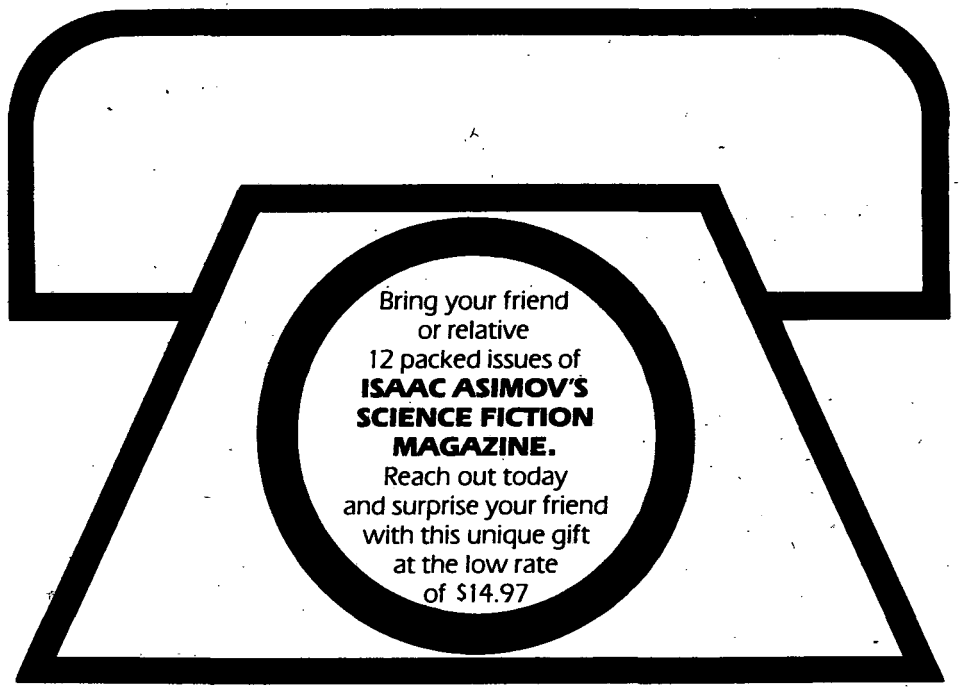

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camp. Another woman, as a child, had a dream that a specific store in her town had burned down. The next morning, she actually saw a fire consuming that very store.

And so the stories went. In some cases the letter writers had other such dreams. In all cases, they seemed like quite sane people who in fact spent much effort denying the dreams to themselves before my story triggered their letters. One letter writer had a "memory dream" similar to mine, in which she lived through an incident in Paris in the 1880s—only learning that it had been Paris in the 1880s when she checked the remembered visual images against reference works.

For me, perhaps the most fascinating group of letters were those dealing directly with dream experiences and creativity, which was what "Perchance To Dream" was centrally about.

S. E. H. wrote of an escalating series of dream experiences. Having never been in any mountains, she had a detailed dream that took place in a mountain setting; when she described it to someone who had been there, that person identified it as a locale in the Smokies. Several years later, she re-read the brief description she had written, and ended up "automatically" writing a 90,000-word novel, even though she says she never had literary ambitions and had been a poor student in English.

As a young man, L. F. was given a college English assignment to write a short story. He was unable to come up with anything. Then, with the deadline approaching, he dreamt he was in an Elizabethan room watching a man write a story. He read the story over that man's shoulder as he was writing it, remembered it all when he woke up, wrote it down word for word, and submitted it to his teacher, and got an A+.

Now these stories might be dismissed as tall tales from unknowns, though not, I think, by anyone who had actually read these calm, lucid, and somewhat reluctant letters. But I also got a letter

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on this subject from someone well-known as a creative artist who does underground comics and sf illustrations.

This artist is an aficionado of tropical fish as well as cacti and succulents, though not an expert botanist or ichthyologist. Nevertheless, in dreams he has "seen" hundreds of species of tropical fish, and to a lesser extent, plants, which he was able to later draw in a waking state. These species of fish proved to be non-existent, but conformed morphologically to what was actually biologically possible.

Most interestingly, he relates this sort of experience to his own higher creative processes, in which visual images emerge from a "pure stream of consciousness," unbidden and to an extent unplanned, just as the tropical fish images came to him in a dream state.

Well what, if anything, does all this mean?

One thing that seems quite clear even from this limited data is that a lot of people who are not vibrating weirdos have dreams that in one way or another intersect waking reality. Another thing that seems clear is that most of them are reluctant to admit this to others, or even to themselves, for fear of having their sanity questioned. Some even question their own sanity. I think this explains the strong reaction, letterwise, to "Perchance To Dream." Apparently there are many people out there, who have had these experiences and/or pondered these questions, who suddenly felt able to discuss them openly once this magazine actually published a story in which a person of some literary reputation explored in public his own experience in this regard.

Since I wrote "Perchance To Dream" and began reading these letters, I have paid more attention to my own dreams and how they do or do not relate to waking reality. My own experiences and what I've read has convinced me that any theory of dreams which discounts them as the meaningless, formless clearing of random memory connections in the brains is, on the face of overwhelming

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evidence, absurd.

I myself remain dubious about precognitive dreams, telepathic dreams, and perhaps even dream imagery emerging out of the collective unconscious, if only because I can concoct no theory which connects these subjective internal events to mass-energy reality. If dreams are unconscious telepathic communication, what energy-vector carries the data? If there *is* a collective species data-bank, where is the data stored and how is it released into dreaming individual consciousness? And if there are precognitive dreams, then the "future" must be predestined, a concept with which I have a great deal of trouble, both philosophically and scientifically.

But from personal experience and now the experience of others, I know damn well that at least some dreams have form, plot, and content. I frequently dream quite structured stories. After a week or so in France, I sometimes dream in much better French than I have in a waking state, and after a week in Germany, I had the same experience with dreaming in German. Whether I've been dreaming in phony French or German is beside the point—the point is that I can follow quite structured dream stories as I dream them in what may or may not be real French or German.

Now of course it can be said that because I write fiction I'm a special case. Since I make my living making up stories in a waking state, it's only natural that I would also tend to "dream in fiction."

But that is exactly the point that seemes to emerge from all this—from the experience of writing "Perchance To Dream," from the letters I've received, and from further observation of my own dream processes—there is some kind of very close analogy between what human consciousness is doing when it is generating dreams and what is happening when that same consciousness, in a waking state, is generating "art" and in particular "fiction," visual or literary.

In both cases, stories are

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being created at some level of consciousness, which is to say structural, esthetic, and formal connections are being made between images and facts stored somewhere, which connections *are not* simply implicit in the raw data. Some level of the mind is bringing esthetic order out of "random chaos" or even creating new images and content out of the void.

Indeed, aside from the fact that one activity takes place while we are asleep and the other while we are awake, it is quite difficult to distinguish the act of dreaming from the act of creating fiction. We certainly do not create our dreams by a conscious intellectual process by definition, and any writer who has ever stared at blank paper in a typewriter for weeks on end knows that the essential inspiration for a story, the true act of fictional creation itself, is not something we call into being by conscious act of will.

It would be very interesting, were it possible, to record the brainwaves of a writer in the very act of fictional inspiration and correlate the physical parameters of this state of consciousness with brainwave recordings of REM sleep.

So, ultimately, I believe that the question "Where does the content of dreams come from?" is really the same question that writers are always asked: "Where do you get your crazy ideas?"

This is *not* to suggest that writers get most of their ideas from dreams, but that in some way dreams and fiction draw on the same "data bank" for their imagery, plot, and content, and that the mental machinery that draws on this data bank and processes it to produce dreams is probably closely related if not identical to the mental machinery which generates creative inspiration.

All writers, and probably most artists, have had the repeated experience of watching "something"—plot, images, setting, characters —emerge from the "nothing" of a mind that the moment before was empty of content. All fiction as well as dreams emerges at some point from

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VIEWPOINT

that void.

But we simply do not understand the nature of this "void" out of which both dreams and waking creativity emerge. Obviously, it is only our conscious minds which perceive this void as empty—because imagery, content, plot, characters, and feelings do in fact spring out of it and into our conscious (or, in the case of dreams, unconscious) sphere of attention.

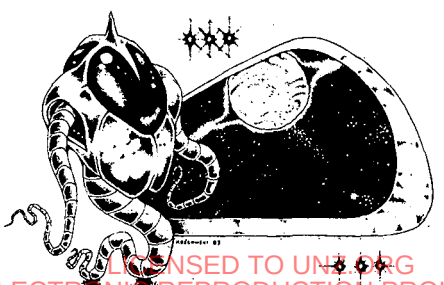
So where is the data bank out of which this stuff emerges? The subconscious individual mind? The collective species unconscious? Telepathic subliminal communication?

Damned if I know. But that store of data must exist *somewhere* or we would neither dream nor write fiction. As a human, I know that stories and images emerge from somewhere into my awareness during sleep as dreams. As a writer, I know that stories and images emerge from somewhere into my typewriter while I am awake.

But as to that mysterious "somewhere" from which dreams and creativity emerge, it remains hidden behind a veil of sleep or "writer's block." All our dreams and fictional creations ultimately emerge from this central void, which, in a somewhat different context, the Australian aborigines call "the Dreamtime." Each night most of us go on a walkabout through the Dreamtime. Some of us seem to be able to do the same thing while "awake."

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

If they do, they're probably "human." If they don't, they'll probably never write fiction.



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OPEN HOUSE AT THE ARCHAEOASTRONOMICAL LIBRARY

Between the card catalog and bestsellers,
Halley expounds on Stonehenge and comets
while Percival Lowell sulks over espresso.
I am briefly distracted by Galileo,
in the firm tow of Maria Mitchell's arm,
arguing amicably over the Sun Dagger.

I end up in the children's section,
dreaming beside a full scale Medicine Wheel.
Here the night mind revolves,
Its twin lobes opening like halves
of a snow-white observatory dome
to absorb all the spectral years.

—Robert Frazier

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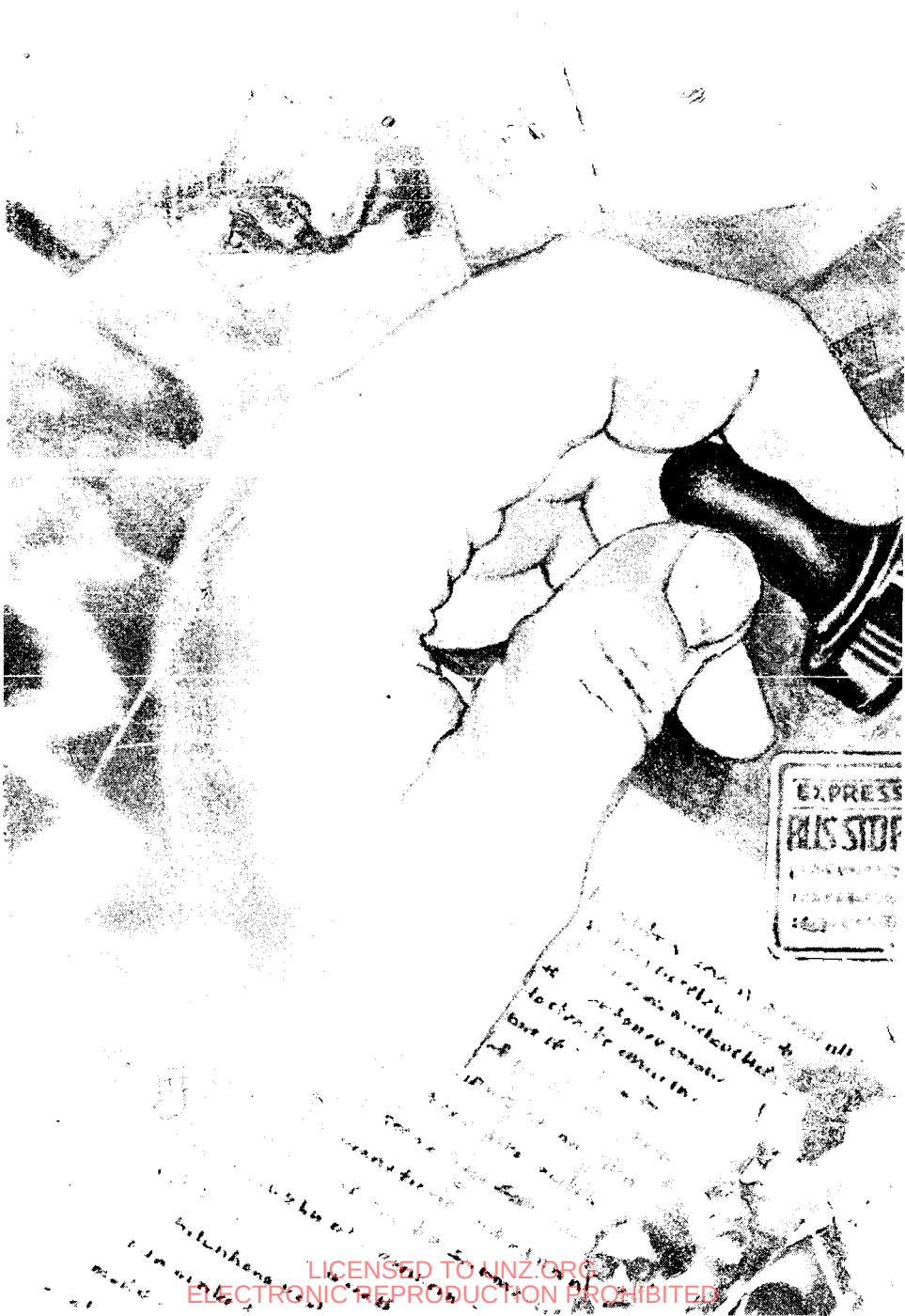

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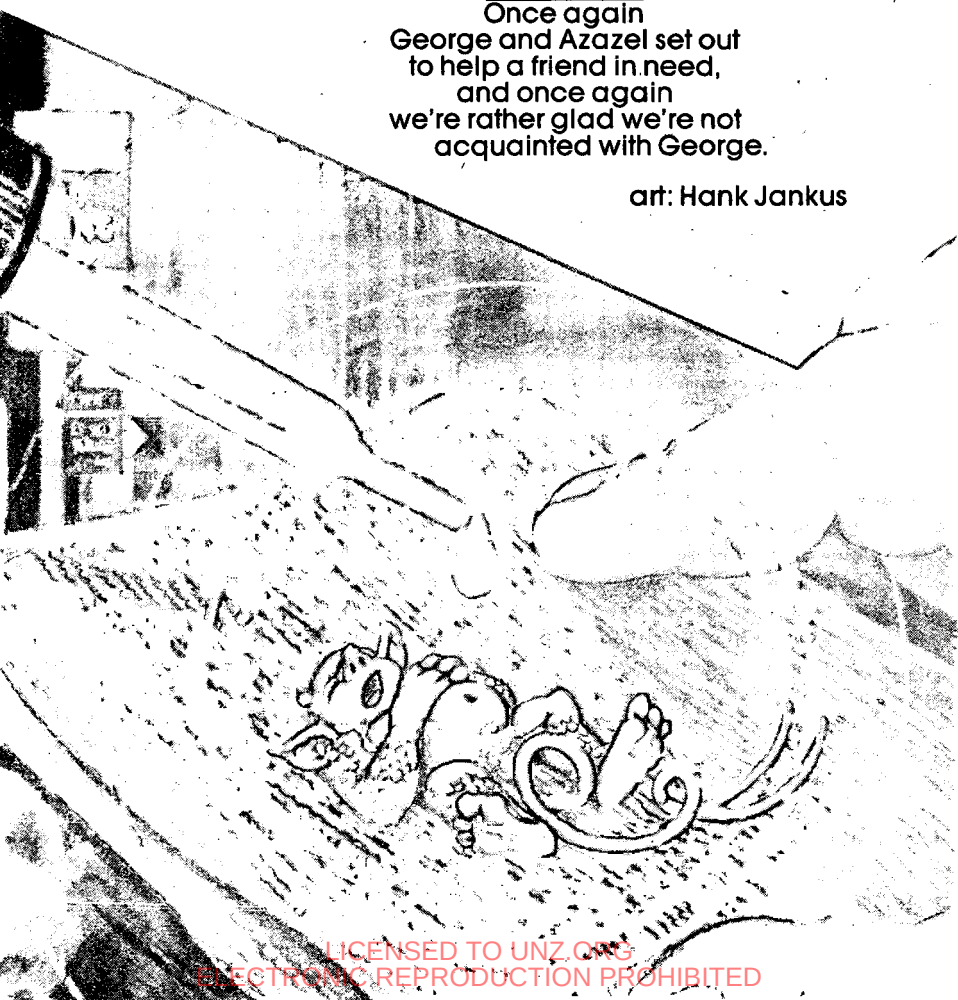
WRITING TIME

by Isaac Asimov

Once again
George and Azazel set out
to help a friend in need,
and once again
we're rather glad we're not
acquainted with George.

art: Hank Jankus



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George said, "I once knew someone like you."

We had a window seat at the small restaurant where we were having lunch, and George was looking out pensively.

I said, "That's astonishing. I should have thought I was unique."

"You are," said George. "The man I am referring to was only a *little* like you. For the ability to scribble, scribble, scribble, while keeping the brain totally detached, you stand alone."

"Actually," I said, "I use a word-processor."

"I use the word 'scribble'," said George, loftily, "in what a real writer would understand as the metaphorical sense." Then he paused over his chocolate mousse to sigh dramatically.

I knew the sign. "You're going to tell me one of your flights of fancy concerning Azazel, aren't you, George?"

He looked at me scornfully. "You've been flying your own fancy so long and so limply, you don't know the ring of truth when you hear it. But never mind. It is too sad a tale to tell you."

"Except that you're going to anyway, aren't you?"

George sighed again.

It's that bus stop out there [said George] that reminds me of Mordecai Sims, who made a moderate living for himself by turning out endless reams of variegated trash. Not as much as you do, of course, and not as trashy, which is why he is only a little like you. To do him justice, I occasionally read some of his material and found it quite so-so. Without meaning to hurt your feelings, you never reach that mark—at least, according to reports, for I have never been quite low enough in my mind to read you myself.

Mordecai was different from you in another respect; he was terribly impatient. Observe yourself in the mirror over there, assuming you have no objection to being reminded of what you look like, and see how you sit here carelessly, one arm thrown over the back of the chair and the rest of you slumped into casual shapelessness. One would never think, to look at you, that you had any concern as to whether your daily quota of randomly-typed paper would be turned out or not.

Mordecai was not like that. He was always conscious of his deadlines—behind which he was in perpetual danger of falling.

I lunched with him regularly every Tuesday in those days and he tended to make the experience a hideous one with his chatter. "I've got to have that piece in the mail by tomorrow morning at the latest," he would say, "and I've got to do a bit of revision on another piece first, and I just don't have the time. Where the devil is that check? Why doesn't the waiter show up? What do they do

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with themselves in the kitchen? Have swimming contests in the gravy?"

He was always particularly impatient with respect to the check, and I would fear that he would make a bolt for it, leaving it behind for me to evade, somehow. To do him justice that never happened, but the feeling that it might tended to spoil the meal.

Or look at that bus stop out there. I have been observing it for fifteen minutes. You'll notice that no bus has come and that it is a windy day with a late-fall nip to the air. What we see are collars turned up, hands thrust into pockets, noses turning red or blue, feet being shuffled for warmth. What we don't see is any rebellion in the ranks, any fists waved angrily to heaven. All those waiting there are broken into passivity by the injustice of life.

Not Mordecai Sims. If he were in that bus line, he would be dashing out into the road to survey the distant horizon for any sign of a vehicle; he would be growling and snarling and waving his arms; he would be urging a mass-march on City Hall. He would, in short, be depleting his adrenal glands.

Many is the time he would turn to me with his complaints, attracted, as so many are, by my cool air of competence and understanding.

"I am a busy man, George," he would say, rapidly. He always talked rapidly. "It's a shame, a scandal, and a crime the way the world conspires against me. I had to drop in at a hospital for some routine tests—God knows why except that my doctor foolishly thinks he has to make a living—and I was told to arrive at 9:40 A.M. at such and such a desk.

"I got there at 9:40 A.M. precisely, of course, and on the desk in question was a sign saying: 'Open for business at 9:30 A.M.' That is what it said George—in English without a letter out of place. Behind the desk, however, there was no one.

"I checked my watch and said to someone who looked hangdog enough to be a hospital attendant, 'Where,' I said, 'is the nameless villain who should be behind that desk?'

" 'Not here yet,' said the low-born knave.

" 'It says this place is open for business at 9:30 A.M.'

" 'Someone will be here sooner or later, I guess,' he answered, with a vicious indifference.

"It was, after all, a hospital. I might be dying. Did anyone care? No! I had a deadline looming for an important item I had expended half my guts on, something that would earn me enough money to pay my doctor's bill (assuming I had nothing better to spend it on, which wasn't likely). Did anyone care? No! It was not till

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10:04 that someone showed up, and when I rushed to the desk, that belated devil stared at me haughtily and said, 'You'll have to wait your turn.' "

Mordecai was full of stories like that; of banks of elevators in which every single one was moving slowly upward when he was waiting in the lobby; of people who lunched from 12 to 3:30 and began their four-day weekends on Wednesday whenever he needed to consult them.

"I don't see why anyone bothered to invent time, George," he would say. "It's just a device to make possible the formation of novel methods of wastage. Do you realize that if I could convert the hours I must spend waiting on the convenience of assorted malapert varlets into writing time for myself, I could increase my output by anywhere from ten to twenty percent. Do you further realize that, despite the criminal parsimony of publishers, that would mean a corresponding increase in my income. —Where is that miserable check?"

I could not help but think it would be a kindly deed to help him increase his income, since he had the good taste to spend some of it on me. What's more, he had a way of selecting first-class places at which to dine, and that warmed my heart. —No, not like this one, old fellow. Your taste falls far short of what it ought to be, as, I am told, one can tell from your writing.

I therefore began to stir my powerful mind for ways to help him.

I did not immediately think of Azazel. In those days, I had not yet grown accustomed to him; I was still uncertain as to whether he was a two-centimeter-tall demon, or an extraterrestrial being from a world with an advanced technology.

Eventually, though, it occurred to me to wonder whether Azazel could do anything about building up someone's writing time. It didn't seem likely and I might be just wasting his time, but what's time to an extraterrestrial?

I went through the necessary routine of getting him across the space warp, or whatever it is, and he arrived asleep. His tiny eyes were closed and there was a high-pitched hum coming from him that rose and fell in an irregular and unpleasant fashion. It may have been the equivalent of a human snore.

I wasn't sure how one went about waking him and, finally, I decided to allow a drop of water to fall on his stomach. He had a perfectly spherical abdomen, you know, as though he had swallowed a ball-bearing. I haven't the slightest idea of whether that is the norm on his world, but once when I mentioned it he de-

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manded to know what a ball-bearing was and then, when I explained, he threatened to zapulniclate me. I didn't know what that meant, but from the tone of his voice, I gathered it was something unpleasant.

The drop of water did wake him, and he was absurdly annoyed, too. He kept talking about having been half-drowned and went into tedious detail as to the proper method of waking one up on his world. It was something about dancing and flower-petals and soft, musical instruments and the touch of the fingers of gorgeous dancing maidens. I told him that on our world we just played garden hoses on each other and he made some remark about ignorant barbarians and eventually cooled down sufficiently to allow me to talk sense to him.

I explained the situation and I rather thought that, without more ado, he would say a few words of gibberish and that would be that. At that time, you see, I still rather suspected he was a demon, and that it would all be a matter of magic and propitiation.

He did no such thing. Instead, he looked grave and said, "See here, you are asking me to interfere with the laws of probability."

I was pleased that he had grasped the situation. "Exactly," I said.

"But that's not easy," he said.

"Of course not," I said. "Would I ask you to do it if it were easy? If it were easy I'd do it myself. It's only when it's not easy that I have to call on someone as magnificently superior as yourself."

Nauseating, of course, but essential when you deal with an extraterrestrial being who is as sensitive about his height as about his ball-bearing belly.

He looked gratified at my logic and said, "Well, I don't say it's *impossible.*"

"Good."

"It would require an adjustment of the Jinwhipper continuum of your world."

"Exactly. You took the words out of my mouth."

"What I will have to do is to introduce a few nodes in the interconnection of the continuum with your friend, the one with the deadlines. What are deadlines, by the way?"

I tried to explain and he said, with a windy little suspiration, "Ah, yes, we have such things in our more ethereal demonstrations of affection. Allow a deadline to pass and the dear little creatures never let you hear the end of it. I remember once—"

But I will spare you the sordid details of his insignificant sex-life.

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"The only thing is," he said, finally, "that once I introduce the nodes, I won't be able to undo them."

"Why not?"

Azazel said, with elaborate casualness, "Theoretically impossible, I'm afraid."

I didn't believe that at all. It was just that the miserable little incompetent didn't know how. Still, since he was quite competent enough to make life impossible for me, I did not let him know I had seen through his charade, but simply said, "You won't have to undo it. Mordecai is after additional writing time and once he has it he will be satisfied for life."

"In that case I shall do it."

For a long time, he made passes. It looked like something a magician would do, except that his hands seemed to flicker and turn invisible now and then for shorter or longer intervals. They were so small, to be sure, it was hard to tell whether they were visible or not even under normal circumstances.

"What are you doing?" I asked, but Azazel shook his head, and his lips moved as though he were counting.

Then, apparently finished, he lay back on the table and panted.

I said, "Is it done?"

He nodded and said, "I hope you realize I had to lower his entropy quotient more or less permanently."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that things will be a little more orderly in his neighborhood than one should suspect."

"Nothing wrong with being orderly," I said. You might not think it, old fellow, but I have always believed in being orderly. I keep an accurate list of every cent I owe you. The details are on innumerable scraps of paper that are here and there in my apartment. You can have them any time you want them.

Azazel said, "Of course there's nothing wrong with being orderly. It's just that you can't really defy the second law of thermodynamics. It means that things will be a little *less* orderly elsewhere in order to restore the balance."

"In what way," I said, checking my zipper. (One can never be too careful.)

"In various ways, mostly unnoticeable. I've spread the effect through the Solar system, so that there will be a few more asteroid collisions than would ordinarily take place, a few more eruptions on Io, and so on. Mostly, it's the Sun that will be affected."

"How?"

"I estimate it will get hot enough to make life on Earth im-

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possible about two and a half million years sooner than it would have before I had noded the continuum."

I shrugged. What are a few million years when it's a question of having someone pick up my dinner checks with that cheerful disposition one likes to see?

It was about a week afterward that I once again dined with Mordecai. He seemed rather excited as he checked his coat, and when he arrived at the table where I was waiting patiently with my drink, he smiled brilliantly.

"George," he said, "what an unusual week I have had." He held his hand up without looking and did not seem at all surprised when a menu was placed in it. Mind you, this was a restaurant at which the waiters, a haughty and imperious lot, gave out no menus without an application in triplicate that had been countersigned by the manager.

Mordecai said, "George, everything has been going like clockwork."

I suppressed a smile. "Indeed?"

"When I walk into the bank, there's an empty window and a smiling cashier. When I walk into the post office, there's an empty window and—well, I guess you wouldn't actually expect a post office employee to smile, but at least he registered a letter of mine with scarcely any snarl at all. The buses drive up as I arrive; and I barely had my hand up in yesterday's rush hour, when a taxi swerved and stopped for me. A Checker cab, too. When I asked to be taken to Fifth and Forty-Ninth, he took me there, showing every sign he knew the layout of the streets of the city. He even spoke English. —What would you like to have, George?"

A glance at the menu was sufficient. Apparently, it was arranged that even I should not delay him. Mordecai then tossed his menu to one side and proceeded to give the order for both of us rapidly. I noticed that he did not look up to see whether a waiter were actually at his side. He had already grown accustomed to assume one would be.

And one was.

The waiter rubbed his hands together, bowed, and proceeded to serve the meal with celerity, grace, and efficiency.

I said, "You do seem to be having the most amazing streak of luck, Mordecai, my friend. How do you account for it?" (I must admit that I had a passing thought that I might make him believe I was responsible. After all, if he knew that, would he not surely shower me with gold, or, in these degenerate times, with paper?)

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"Simple," he said, tucking his napkin into his shirt-collar and seizing his knife and fork in a death-grip, for Mordecai, with all his virtues, was not one of your dainty feeders. "It's not luck at all. It's the inevitable result of the workings of chance."

"Of *chance?*" I said, indignantly.

Mordecai said, "Certainly. I have spent my whole life enduring the most miserable series of fortuitous delays that the world has ever seen. The laws of chance make it necessary that such an unbroken fund of misfortune be made up for, and that's what's happening now, and should continue to be happening for the rest of my life. I expect it to. I have confidence. Everything is balancing out." He leaned toward me and tapped me on the chest in a most unpleasant way. "Depend upon it. You can't defy the laws of probability."

He spent the entire meal lecturing me on the laws of probability, concerning which, I am sure, he actually knew as little as you do.

I finally said, "Surely all this gives you more writing time."

"Obviously," he said. "I estimate that my writing time has increased by twenty percent."

"And your output has gone up correspondingly, I imagine."

"Well," he said, a little uncomfortably, "not just yet, I'm afraid. Naturally, I have to adjust. I'm not quite used to getting things done so quickly. It took me by surprise."

Frankly, he didn't look surprised to me. He lifted his hand and, without looking, plucked the bill from the fingers of the waiter who was just approaching with it. He glanced at it cursorily and handed it back, with a credit card, to the waiter who had actually waited for it and who then left on the double.

The entire dinner had taken a little over thirty minutes. I will not hide from you the fact that I would have preferred a civilized two and a half hours, with champagne preceding, brandy succeeding, a fine wine or two separating the courses, and cultured conversations filling all the interstices. However, on the bright side, was the fact that Mordecai had saved two hours which he could spend money-grubbing for himself and, to an extent, for me.

As it happened, I didn't see Mordecai for three weeks or so after that dinner. I don't remember why that was, but I rather suspect it was one of those occasions in which we took turns being out of town.

At any rate, I was just emerging one morning from a coffee shop at which I sometimes partake of a roll and scrambled eggs,

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when I saw Mordecai standing at the corner about half a block away.

It was a miserable day of wet snow—the kind of day on which empty taxis approach you only in order to send a spray of dark gray slush over your pants-legs as they shoot past you and turn on their off-duty signs.

Mordecai had his back to me and was just raising his hand when an empty taxi rolled cautiously toward him. To my astonishment, Mordecai looked away. The taxi lingered, then crawled off, disappointment written across the face of its windshield.

Mordecai raised his hand a second time and, from nowhere at all, a second taxi appeared and stopped for him. He got in but, as I could clearly hear even from a distance of forty yards, he did so with a ringing set of expletives not fit to be heard by anyone of tender upbringing, assuming that any such remain in the city.

I phoned him later that morning and arranged to have cocktails with him at a friendly bar he knew that featured one "Happy Hour" after another the whole day long. I could hardly wait, for I simply had to have an explanation from him.

What I wanted to know was the meaning of the expletives he used. —No, old fellow, I don't mean the dictionary meaning of the words, assuming they can be found in the dictionary. I meant why he should have used them at all. By all rights, he should have been ecstatically happy.

When he entered the bar, he was not looking noticeably happy. In fact, he looked distinctly haggard.

He said, "Signal for the waitress, will you, George?"

It was one of those bars where the waitresses were dressed without any undue regard for warmth, which, of course, helped keep *me* warm. I signalled for one gladly, even though I knew she would interpret my gestures as merely signifying a desire to place an order for a drink.

In actual fact, she didn't interpret it at all, for she ignored me by keeping her very bare back firmly to me.

I said, "Really, Mordecai, if you want service, you'll have to signal yourself. The laws of probability have not yet bestirred themselves on my behalf; which is a shame, for it is long past time for my rich uncle to die and to disinherit his son in my favor."

"You have a rich uncle?" asked Mordecai, with a flicker of interest.

"No! And that only makes the whole thing even more unjust. Signal for a drink, will you, Mordecai?"

"The hell with it," said Mordecai, grumpily. "Let them wait."

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It was not *them* waiting that bothered me, of course, but my curiosity overcame my thirst.

"Mordecai," I said, "you seem unhappy. In fact, although you didn't see me this A.M., I saw you. You actually ignored an empty taxi on a day when they were worth their weight in gold at 1936 prices—and then swore somewhat when you took a second."

Mordecai said, "Is that so? Well, I'm tired of those bastards. Taxis *haunt* me. They follow me around in long lines. I can't as much as look toward the oncoming traffic without one of them stopping. I'm hovered over by crowds of waiters. Shopkeepers open closed stores at my approach. Every elevator flings itself wide as soon as I enter a building and waits for me stolidly at whatever floor I'm on. At every conceivable business office I am instantly waved through the reception area by grinning hordes of receptionists. Minor functionaries at every level of government exist only to—"

By then I had caught my breath. "But, Mordecai," I said, "this is splendid good fortune. The laws of probability—"

What he suggested I do to the laws of probabilities was entirely impossible, of course, since they are abstractions without corporeal parts.

"But, Mordecai," I expostulated, "all this goes to increase your writing time."

"It does *not,*" said Mordecai, forcefully, "I can't write at all."

"Why not, for heaven's sake?"

"Because I have lost *thinking* time."

"You have lost *what?*" I asked, faintly.

"All this waiting I have had to do; on lines, on street-corners, in outer offices, was when I *thought,* when I figured out what I was going to write. It was my all-important preparation time."

"I didn't know that."

"I didn't either, but I know it *now.*"

I said, "I thought you spent all such waiting time fuming and swearing and eating your heart out."

"Part of the time was spent that way. The rest of the time I spent thinking. And even the time that I spent railing at the injustice of the Universe was useful, for it revved me up and set all my hormones frothing through my blood-stream so that when I *did* reach my typewriter I let all my frustrations boil off in one great and forceful banging at its keys. My thinking supplied my intellectual motivation and my anger supplied my emotional motivation. Together they resulted in huge blocks of excellent

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writing pouring out of the dark and infernal fires of my soul. *Now* what have I got? Watch!"

He clicked thumb and middle-finger softly and at once a gorgeously-unapparelled damsel was within hand-reach, saying, "May I serve you, sir?"

Of course she could, but Mordecai merely ordered disconsolate drinks for the two of us.

"I thought," he said, "it was merely a matter of getting adjusted to the new situation, but I know now that no adjustment is possible."

"You can refuse to take advantage of the situation as it is offered to you."

"Can I? You saw me this morning. If I refuse a taxi, it just means another comes. I can refuse fifty times and there'll be one waiting on the fifty-first occasion. They wear me out."

"Well, then, why can't you simply reserve an hour or two every day for thinking time in the comfort of your office."

"Exactly! In the comfort of my office! I can only think well, when I am shifting from foot to foot on a street-corner, or sitting on a granite chair in a drafty waiting-room, or hungering in an unserviced dining room. I need the impetus of outrage."

"But are you not outraged now?"

"It's not the same thing. One can be outraged at injustice, but how can one be outraged at everyone being too kind and thoughtful to you—the insensitive louts? I am *not* outraged now, I am merely sad; and I can't write at all when I am sad."

We sat through the most unhappy Happy Hour I have ever encountered.

"I swear to you, George," said Mordecai, "I think I have been cursed. I think that some fairy godmother, furious at having not been invited to my christening, has finally found the one thing worse than being forced into unwanted delay at every turn. She has found the curse of total subservience to one's wishes."

At the sight of his misery, a not-unmanly tear rose to my eye, at the thought that I was myself none other than the fairy godmother he referred to, and that somehow he might find this out. After all, if he did, he might, in his despair, kill himself, or, far worse, me.

Then came the ultimate horror. Having called for the bill and, of course, received it at once, he studied it with lackluster eye, tossed it to me, and said, with a hollow, hacking laugh, "Here, you pay for it. I'm going home."

I paid. What choice had I? But it left a wound I still feel on

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damp days. After all, is it right that I had shortened the lifetime of the Sun by two and a half million years just so that I would have to pay for drinks? Is that justice?

I never saw Mordecai again. I heard, eventually, that he had left the country and had become a beachcomber somewhere in the South Seas.

I don't know exactly what a beachcomber does, but I suspect they don't get wealthy at it. However, I am quite sure that if he is on the beach and should want a wave, a wave would come at once.

By now, our bill had been brought by a sneering flunkey and it lay between us while George ignored it with the magnificent flare he usually brings to such a performance.

I said, "You're not thinking of having Azazel do anything for me, George, are you?"

"Not really," said George. "Unfortunately, old fellow, you are not the kind of person whom one thinks of in connection with good deeds."

"Then you'll do nothing for me?"

"Not a thing."

"Good," I said. "Then I'll pay the check."

"It's the least you can do," said George. ●

THE TWENTY-FIFTH

(Found in the archives of Sirius IV)

This child, the first to join the colonists,
Arrived at dawn—first to be born alive.
Look at her perfect ears, the tiny fists,
The dreaming eyes. Now we are twenty-five
Who yesterday were only twenty-four.
What miracle is this? If we had bells,
The bells would ring. If we had wine to pour,
Our cups would overflow. This joy foretells
A fertile future in an alien place
Where dogs have never barked nor children played.
Mary will sew a doll. Joe has found wood
To finish up the cradle he has made.
Someday we'll have a school. Oh, life is good.
The sun is out. Come look upon her face.

—Hope Athearn

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art: Doug Beekman

THE BRIDE OF BIGFOOT

by Kit Reed

The author's most recent works include her novels *The Ballad of T. Rantula* (Little, Brown) and *Magic Time* (Putnam/Berkley), and her collection *Other Stories And: The Attack of the Giant Baby* (Berkley). A novel, *Fortress of The Rich,* and a short story collection, *The Revenge of the Senior Citizens,* are forthcoming from Doubleday.

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Imagine the two of us together, the sound of our flesh colliding: the smell of him. The smell of me.

At first I was afraid. Who would not be frightened by stirring shadows, leaves that shiver inexplicably, the suspicion that just outside the circle of bug lamps and firelight something huge has passed? If there was a thing at all, it was reported to be shy; the best photographs are blurred and of questionable origin; hunters said it would not attack even if provoked, but still . . . The silence it left behind was enormous; I could feel my heart shudder in my chest. With gross figures roaming, who would not be afraid?

We did not see or hear it; there was only the intimation. It had been there. It was gone. Thomas, whom I married six months ago, said, Listen. I said, I don't hear anything. Roberta said, I'm cold. Thomas persisted: I thought I heard something. Did you hear anything? I did not speak, but Malcolm, who was torturing steaks on our behalf, spoke politely: Everybody's so quiet, it must be twenty of or twenty after. Then Roberta said, Something just walked over my grave. I tried to laugh, but I was cold.

This was the night of our first cookout of the summer, shortly before I found certain pieces of my underwear missing from the line.

Our house is on the outer ring of streets here, so that instead of backing up to our neighbors' carports and barbecues, we look out at a wooded hillside, dense undergrowth and slender trees marching up the slope.

If it weren't for dust and attrition and human failure our house would be picture perfect. I used to want to go to live in one of our arrangements; the future would find me among the plant stands, splayfooted and supporting a begonia; I would be both beautiful and functional, a true work of art. Or I would be discovered on the sofa among the pillows, my permanent face fixed in a perpetual smile. I would face the future with no worries and no obligations, just one more pretty, blameless thing. It's a long road that knows no turning but an even longer one we women go. Each night even as I surveyed my creation I could see fresh dust settling on my polished surfaces, crumbs collecting on my kitchen floor, and I knew soon the light would change and leaves drop from my plants no matter what I did. Each night I knew I had to turn from my creations and start dinner because although Thomas and I both worked, it was I who must prepare the food. Because women are free and we are in the new society I was not forced to do these things; I had to do them by choice.

But it was summer, we opened all the windows and went in the

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yard without coats. We had that first cookout and maybe it was the curling smoke that wakened it, or maybe it saw me in my bathing suit. . . . All I can tell you is that I lost certain underthings: my satin panties, my gossamer-sheen bra. When I came home from work at night I went directly into the back yard. I tried to penetrate the woods, staring at the screen of leaves for so long that I was certain I had seen something move. The summer air was already dense with its scent, but what it was I did not know; I could not be sure whether that was a tuft of hair caught in the wild honeysuckle or only fur. Every night I lingered and therefore had to apologize to Thomas because dinner was late.

Something dragged a flowering bush to our door. Outside our bedroom the flowers were flattened mysteriously. I got up at dawn and listened to the woods. Did I imagine the sound of soft breath? Did I catch a flash of gold among the leaves, the pattern of shadows dappling a naked flank?

In midsummer something left a dead bird with some flowers on my kitchen table and I stopped going outside. I stopped leaving the windows open, too; I told Thomas we would sleep better with the air conditioning. I should have known none of our arrangements are permanent. Even with the house sealed and the air conditioner whirring I could hear something crashing in the woods. I ran to the back door to see and when I found nothing I stood a moment longer so that even though I could not see it, it would see me. When we went to bed that night it was not Thomas I imagined next to me, but something else.

In August I retreated to the kitchen; with the oven fan going and the radio on, the blender whizzing and all my whips and ladles and spatulas laid out I could pretend there was nothing funny happening. We had seafood soufflé one night and the next we had veal medallions, one of my best efforts. When we went to bed Thomas turned to me and I tried to be attentive but I was already torn. I was as uneasy as a girl waiting for something new to come to the high school party—one of those strange, tough boys that shows up unexpectedly, with a black T-shirt and the long, slick hair, who stands there with his pelvis on the slant and the slightly dangerous look that lets you know your mother would never approve.

On Friday I made salmon mayonnaise, which I decorated with cress and dill, and for dessert I made a raspberry fool, after which I put on my lavender shift and opened the back door. In spite of the heat I stood there until Thomas came in the front door. Then I touched the corners of the mats and napkins on my pretty table

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and aligned the wine glasses and the water tumblers because Thomas and I had pretty arrangements and we set store by them.

Honey, why such a big kiss?

I missed you, I said. How was your day?

Much the same.

So we sat down at the little table with all our precious objects: the crystal candle holders, the wedding china, the Waterford, him, me. I asked if he liked his dinner.

Mmmm.

All right; I tried to slip it in. Am I doing something wrong?

I'm just a little tired.

Tell me about your day, you never do.

Mmm.

Outside, the thing in the woods was stirring. Thomas, love is to man a thing apart, it's woman's whole existence.

Mmmmm.

In the woods there was the thunder of air curdling: something stopping in mid-rush.

I love you, Thomas.

I love you.

Honey, are you sure?

Mmmmm.

I put out a dish of milk for it.

No, lieutenant, there were no signs of a struggle, one reason I didn't think to call you right away. I thought she had just stepped out and was coming back. When I got home from work Monday she was gone. Nothing out of order, nothing to raise your suspicions, no broken windows or torn screens. The house was shining clean. She had even left a chicken pie for me. But there was this strange, wild stink in the bedroom, plus which later I found *this* stuck in the ornamental palm tree on our screen door; your lab could tell if it's hair, or fur.

I wish I could give you more details, like whether the thing knocked my wife out or tied her up or what, but I wasn't too careful looking for clues because I didn't even know there was a Thing. For all I knew she had run over to a neighbor's, or down to the store to pick up some wine, which is what I thought in spite of the heap of clothes by the bed, thought even after it got dark.

By midnight when I hadn't heard I called her folks. You can imagine. Then I checked the closet with my heart going clunk, clunk. Nothing gone. Her bankbook and wallet were in her purse. All right, I should have called you but to tell the truth I thought

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it was something I could handle by myself. Ought to handle. A man has a right to protect what's his, *droit de seigneur,* OK? Besides, I didn't think it was kidnappers. That grey fur. The smell. It had to be some kind of wild animal, an element with which I am equipped to cope. I used to hunt with my father, and I know what animals do when they're spooked. Your cordon of men or police helicopter could panic it into doing something we would all be sorry for. I figured if it was a bear or wolf or something that got in, and it didn't kill her right here, it had probably carried her off to its lair, which meant it was a job for one man alone.

Now, I have my share of trophies. You might as well know back home I was an Eagle Scout and furthermore I am a paid-up member of the N.R.A. Plus which, this is not exactly the wilds. This is suburban living enhanced by proximity to the woods. If something carried off my wife I would stalk it to its lair and lie in wait. Then when it fell asleep or went off hunting, I would swarm in and carry her out.

All right, it did cross my mind that we might get an exclusive. Also it was marginally possible that if I rescued her we might lure the creature into the open. I could booby trap the terrace and snare it on the hoof. Right, I had guessed what it was. Imagine the publicity! The North American serial rights alone . . . after which we could take our sweet time deciding which publisher, holding the paperback auction, choosing between the major motion picture and an exclusive on TV. I personally would opt for the movie, we could sell backward to television and follow up with a series pilot and spinoff, the possibilities are astronomical, and if we could get the thing to agree to star . . .

But my Sue is a sentimental girl and I couldn't spring this on her all at once. First I had to get her home and then I was going to have to walk her through it, one step at a time, how I was going to make it clear to the public that she was an unwilling prisoner, so nobody would think she was easy, or cheap. You know how girls are. I was going to have to promise not to take advantage of her privileged relationship with the thing. But what if we could train it to do what we wanted? What if we taught it to talk! I was going to lay it out to her in terms of fitting recompense. I mean, there is no point being a victim when you can cash in on a slice of your life.

Lord, if that was all I had to worry about! But what did I know? That was in another country, and besides . . . Right, T.S. Eliot. I don't want you to think of me as an uncultivated man.

I got up before dawn and dressed for the hunt: long-sleeved

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shirt and long trousers, against the insects; boots, against the snakes. I tied up my head for personal reasons and smeared insect repellent on my hands and face. Then I got the rest of my equipment: hunting knife, with sheath; a pint of rye, to lure it; tape recorder, don't ask; my rifle, in case. A coil of rope.

It took less time to track it than I thought. You might not even know there was anything in the woods because you're not attuned to these things, but I can tell you they left a trail a mile wide. Broken twigs, twisted leaves, that kind of thing. So I closed in on their arrangement while it was still light; I came over the last rise and down into a thicket and there it was. I had expected to have a hard time locating her once I got to the lair; the thing would have tied her in a tree, say, or concealed her under a mass of brush or behind a pile of rocks.

This was not the case. She was right out in the open, sitting on a ledge in front of its lair just as nice as you please. Except for the one thing, you would think she was out sunning in the park. Right. Except for the dirt and flowers in her hair, she was *au naturel*. There was my wife Susie sitting with a pile of fruits in season, she was not tied up and she was not screaming, she wasn't even writing a note. She was—good lord, she was combing her hair. I went to earth. I had to be careful in case the thing was using her for bait. It could be in its cave lying in wait, or circling behind me, ready to attack. I lay still for an hour while she combed and hummed and nothing happened. There was nothing, not even a trace. I got up and showed myself.

I guess I startled her. She jumped three feet. I said, Don't be frightened, it's me.

Oh, it's you. Where did you come from?

Never mind that now. We have to hurry.

What are you doing?

Suze, I have come to take you home.

Imagine my surprise. All this way to rescue my darling helpmate, the equipment, the precautions, the expense, and all she could find to say was: You can't do that.

What do you mean?

So she was trying to spare my feelings, but that would take me some time to figure out. You have to go for your own good, Thomas. He'll tear you limb from limb.

Just let him try. I shook my rifle.

Thomas, no!

I did not like the way this was going. Not only was she not thrilled to see me but she showed signs of wanting to stay put.

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I was not sure what we had here, whether she was playing a game I had not learned the rules to or whether she had been unhinged by the experience. You should only have to court a woman once. What I did at this point was assert my rights. Any husband would have done the same. I said, Enough is enough, honey, now let's get home before it gets dark. Listen, this is for your own good. Susie, what are you doing with that rock?

To make a long story short I had to bop her on the head and drag her out.

I don't know how we made it back to the house. Halfway down the hill she woke up and started struggling so I had to throw her on the ground and tie her up, in addition to which the woods were filled with what I would have to call intimations of the creature. There was always your getting pounced upon from the shadows, or jumped out of a tree onto, to say nothing of your getting grabbed from behind and shaken, your neck snapped with one pop. I kept thinking I heard the thing sneaking up behind me, I imagined its foul breath on my neck. As a matter of fact I never saw hide nor hair of it, and it crossed my mind that there might never have been a thing, a thought I quickly banished. Of course there had. Then I figured out that it was afraid to run after what it believed in, which meant that it was craven indeed, to let her go without a fight.

As soon as we got inside I locked all the doors and windows and put Susie in the tub with a hooker of gin and a pint of bubble bath, after which, together, we washed all that stuff out of her hair, including the smell. I guess the gin opened the floodgates; she just sat there with the tears running down her cheeks while I picked the flowers out of her hair. Somehow I knew this was not the time to bring up the major motion picture. What we had here might turn out to be private and not interesting to anybody but us.

There, there, Suze, I said. Don't feel bad.

She only cried louder.

Now we know who loves you the most.

She just kept on crying.

I tried to cheer her up by making a joke. Maybe it found a cheap date.

She howled and wouldn't speak to me.

So I looked at her naked, heaving shoulders and I thought: *Aren't you going to apologize?* I was afraid to ask but I had to say something; after all, she was my wife.

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Don't be ashamed, Suze. We all get carried away at least once in our life.

When she would not stop crying I thought it must have been one of those one-night stands; if the thing cared about her at all it would be tearing the house down to get to her. She would get over it, I thought. But she would not be consoled. There, there, I said, there there. When this blows over I'll buy you a car.

Fat lot I knew. It was a tactic. All the thing had to do was lay back and wait for her to get loose. Which I discovered shortly before dawn when I woke to an unusual sound. I sat up and saw her moving among the bedroom curtains, trying to unlock the sliding door. Was the thing in the bushes, waiting? Would she run outside with cries of delight? I was afraid to find out. I sprang up and tackled her, after which I laid down the law. She didn't argue, she only wept and languished. It was terrible. I had tried to arm against the enemy outside and all the time I had this enemy within. I called us both in sick at work after which I marched her with me to the hardware store and surveilled her the whole time I was buying locks. Then I barred the doors and put extra locks on all the windows. The thing was so smart it wasn't going to show itself. It was just going to sit tight and wait. Well, two could play at that game, I thought. When it got tired of waiting and showed itself I would blow it apart.

I suppose I was counting too much on her. I thought sooner or later she would clean herself up and apologize and we could go back to our life. Not so. We went from vacation time into leave without pay and she was still a mess. She would not stop crying and she wouldn't speak to me. She just kept plastering herself to the windows with this awful look of hope. In addition to which, there was the smell. In spite of everything we still had this strange and fearsome smell. It would fill the room when I least expected it. My Susie would lift her head and sniff and grin and if I tried to lay a hand on her, look out! It was enough to make a grown man weep.

I had to act.

So what I did was put her in the cellar and lock her up, after which I put on my hunting clothes and located the equipment: rifle, knife, rope. The tape recorder, she had smashed. I didn't know how far I would have to stalk the thing or what I would have to do to make it show itself but I was sick of the waiting game.

Damn right I was scared. I took the double bar off the back door and went down the steps. I tiptoed across the night garden, and

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over to the trees. I know you're in there, I said in a reasonable tone. If you don't come out I'm coming in after you.

There was nothing, only the smell. I thought I would pass out.

Homewrecker. Bastard, come on. Right, I was getting mad. I cocked the rifle. In another minute I was going to spray the trees.

Then it showed itself. It just parted the maples like swinging doors and walked out.

Huge. Yes, and that fetor, wow! The hair that covered it, the teeth . . . You've heard tales brought back by hunters. You can imagine the rest. The thing stood there in the moonlight with its yellow teeth bared while I kept my rifle trained on its chest. It just stood there snuffling. I was . . . all right, I was overconfident. I yelled: Are you going to leave Susie and me alone or what?

At which point it sprang. Before I could even squeeze the trigger this great big monstrous thing sprang right on top of me after which I don't remember much except the explosion of my rifle, the kick. So it must be wounded, at least, which I suppose means it has left a trail of blood, but Lieutenant, I don't want to press charges. The thing is, my Susie left me of her own free will and now that all is said and done I understand.

No, I can't explain, not exactly, except it has to do with the thing: the stench, the roar, the smack of its prodigious flesh. It must have squeezed the daylights out of me after which it threw me into Malcolm's grape arbor, which is where I woke up. They were gone, together, and Malcolm was calling the police.

So I'm letting her go, Lieutenant, and with my blessings, because in the grip of the monster I understood. For those few seconds I was disassembled, helpless in the power of a force I could not withstand. I learned something extraordinary in that terrible embrace. Susie didn't want this thing; it just carried her away. So I saw that there are things we don't *want* to lust after, but we desire them even as we beg forgiveness of those we love. We lay out these straight lines to walk along, and we walk on them in an orderly way until something wild happens that parts or bends them so we can see what's waiting just underneath: the chasm we are skating over, how close chaos is. If this could happen to my Susie, it could happen to you. To me. How can I not forgive her? Who am I to say the next time something big comes along, I won't get carried away? ●

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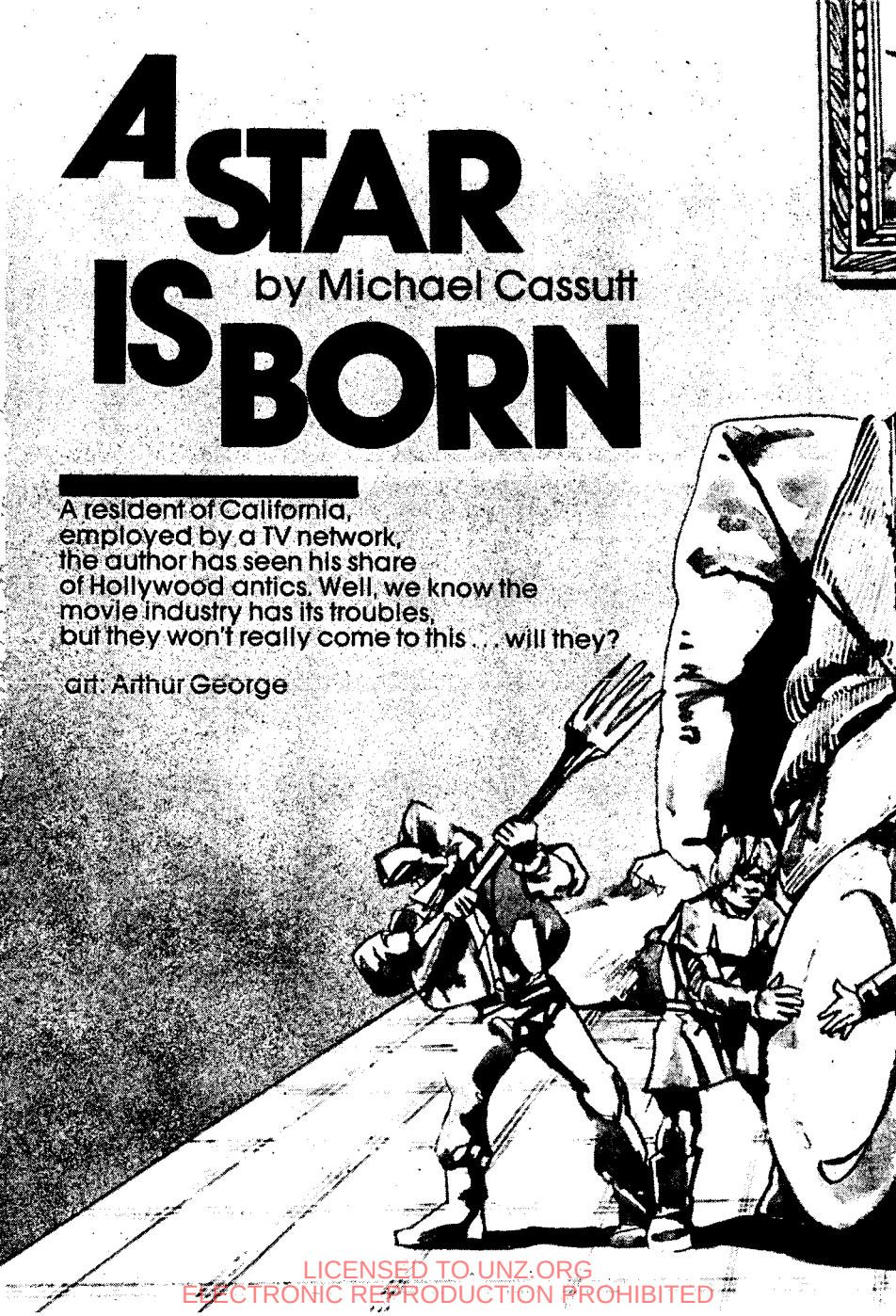
A STAR IS BORN

by Michael Cassutt

A resident of California, employed by a TV network, the author has seen his share of Hollywood antics. Well, we know the movie industry has its troubles, but they won't really come to this . . . will they?

art: Arthur George



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She was the friend of a friend of a friend. In Hollywood, pitiful as it's become, that's still close enough for lunch.

I was only going by a brief phone call and pitch from Sidney the Agent, who described Allison Danch as "a real nice girl, bright, talented, hard-working, anxious to break in, big hooters." Okay, so I was mildly interested, even though the last thing I needed that week was to take out Sidney's second cousin's niece. (Hollywood Rule #1: Everyone is connected to everyone else.) However, with the Intergalactic project overdue and about to implode, taking with it my expense account, I'd have escorted the Sea Hag to La Serre. Allison and I arranged to meet at Gulliver.

I was so eager to be out of the office, should Intergal's business affairs people call, that I reached the restaurant half an hour early, forcing me to get a drink and sit by the hostess' stand with a dozen holographic Lilliputians for company. It was sort of fun. You can make obscene suggestions to them which scramble their response programs all to hell. Mostly they just shake their itty-bitty heads and squeak, "You sure do talk funny, big guy!"

"Brian?"

I looked up. "Allison."

We shook hands and the hostess, in her 17th-century outfit, led us down a tiny cobblestone street into the city of Lilliput. We got a good table, one right above the main inn. Allison giggled all the way, as little "people" kept crowding around her, peering up her dress, grabbing onto her hands, making noise. She took my arm when she stumbled on the cobblestone; I liked that.

"Don't worry about squashing them," I told her. "They're just projections."

"They look so real."

"Welcome to Hollywood."

She was what you'd call just this side of extremely good-looking. Her hair was light brown with hints of blond, which could have come from time spent in the sun, or from a bad streak. Her skin was clear and smooth—like porcelain, if you will—and either free of makeup or made up with stunning subtlety. In my cool, quick appraisal I marked that as her best feature. I could not judge her figure, since she was wearing one of those severe, stylish business suits, an outfit so proper that I felt toadish sitting next to her in my Dodgers warmup jacket. It struck me that she might want to shed a pound or two; nevertheless, it was obvious that Sidney the

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Agent's estimate of her secondary sex characteristics was dead on. And she did have a nice smile.

Our order was taken by a Lilliputian who tossed a line up to our table from the top floor of the miniature palace across the street. The tiny three-pronged spike made a convincing *chunk!* on the tablecloth. "I *felt* that," Allison said, eyes widening. The "waiter" himself thudded loudly when he swung across the street, banging into the front of the inn. He laboriously—yet quickly—scraped his way to the top and sat there on the lip of an ashtray, mopping his brow. "Eh. Mmm. Your desires, gentlefolk? Libation, perhaps?"

We ordered a couple of glasses of white wine (my one concession to civilized pretense) and the waiter swung away, Tarzan-like. "Earth to Allison," I said.

She turned back, having been watching with charmed and total fascination as the waiter made his way down the street. "Sorry," she said, blushing, "I've never seen anything like this."

"Don't feel bad. It's the only one of its kind, for now. Of course, pretty soon they'll franchise it, and then you can have Gulliver in Dubuque, too."

"Des Moines."

"Sorry. So what have you been doing in Des Moines that drives you to California?"

"Local television, mostly."

A human waitress delivered the wine, gave us menus, and took our order. They haven't quite figured out how to get holograms to carry things yet. "Talk show host?" It was a patronizing choice, I know, but what else does a pretty woman *do* in flyover country?

"News."

"What's that, hog prices and wheat futures? Somehow I can't picture you doing stand-ups in front of the county courthouse."

"I don't, any more. I'm an assignment editor."

"Why on earth are you lunching with a second-rate scanimator in Studio City? You should be jetting to Atlanta to take a meeting with those people who did the vulture job on Turner's organization. At the very least you could head up to Minneapolis—that's somewhere near Des Moines, isn't it? Talk to the Hubbards. I mean, reality is what people are interested in."

Allison shrugged. Salads were being delivered, driven up to the table by a tiny "horse-drawn" cart. The waitress arrived in time to set the dishes on the table. I picked up the correct fork and took a bite. I smiled, waiting for it:

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"I've always liked to read and I've always loved telling stories. I guess what I want to do is produce my own movies."

There it was. I kept the smile on my face, having been around this block before. "Tell me, lovely Allison, what makes you think anyone does any producing or developing in Hollywood any more? That went out with backlots and ten percent interest. We have a saying these days: 'People don't make movies, they remake them.' There *are* no stories. A movie 'star,' Allison, is just a face . . . a reputation . . . raw material you can use for a reference tape. Plug the tape into the right scanimation program and you can make your dreams come true. Want to see Ronald Reagan in *Casablanca*? You got it. How about James Dean in *Saturday Night Fever*? Easy. All you need is some old movies, the reference program, and about three million bucks worth of equipment."

She had stopped eating halfway through the lecture. "I never realized that."

"Nobody does, outside Hollywood. It doesn't make any difference. Look, Universal's backlot is a goddamn amusement park, Fox is now condominiums, MGM is where they build laser battle stations these days; they've all been owned by energy companies for years, and companies like that really hate the risks of the entertainment business. They like the glamour, don't get me wrong, but the bottom line—it wiggles too much. So the philosophy, certainly for the past ten years and especially since the Quake, has been, 'Don't take chances. Work the catalogue.' "

"Which explains why I've seen four different versions of *Gone With the Wind*?"

"Exactly." I lowered my voice. The lunch crowd was filling the tables and the chittering squabble of pseudo-Lilliputians was in the air. "For example, right now I'm working on a smutty version of something called *Reap the Wild Wind*, only instead of Ray Milland and John Wayne fighting over Susan Hayward, we're using Jason Strete, Stanley Q, and some popsie whose name even *I* can't remember today."

"Aren't Strete and Q blitz singers?"

"Right. And who cares? Ray and John did the acting for them. We just sort of . . . replace them, splicing in some appropriately naughty footage from our huge files, scanimate, add a couple of cuts from Strete and Q's latest disc, and it's a fast twenty million gross, when you include the soundtrack and Fotonovel."

Allison poked at her by-now limp salad for a while. Presently she said, "How can you stand it?"

"I used to ask myself that. I guess I can stand it because I'm

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not particularly enamored of all this Hollywood nostalgia in the first place. A revival of *The Big Sleep* doesn't make my heart beat. I can't tell Joan Crawford from Broderick Crawford. I tell myself that *most* of the work done in this town since it was nothing but orange groves has been schlock—now it's just scanimated schlock. Since I'm basically a technician I get satisfaction out of the work itself. I *like* playing with sound and tape. My saving grace is that I know it. A lot of scanimators delude themselves that they're the reincarnations of D. W. Griffith or Irving Thalberg." I could see I'd thoroughly depressed Allison by now. "Hey, don't let me completely ruin your lunch. *Some* things are better now, in a way, than they were in the glorious Thirties. You don't have your lead actor showing up so drunk he's walking on his knees, and you don't have to deal with scripts that read like translations from a Slavic language. Forgive the lecture; that's one thing I have in common with the old moguls."

"Don't apologize. I'm glad you were honest with me. I mean, you could have told me anything, and I'd have probably believed you."

"Believe this: your shrimp's getting cold."

After lunch, back in my palatial office, I sat at my desk going over a much-too-optimistic production shedule while China toiled in the next room on the scanimator. We had finished the major work on the project—turning the black and white print into color tape. We had broken down the old soundtrack digitally, separating music and voices and wiping the horrible old music into oblivion, then we added the voices of Strete, Q and the bimbo by ADR. The print had been re-edited as well, cut from the original ninety-five minutes down to less than sixty, from which point we built back up to seventy-five minutes by adding fifteen minutes of smut here and there. We were now about a third of the way through the actual scanimation process, by which the faces and bodies of the old leads are replaced electronically by our new heroes. This is the time-consuming part. You run the program, you screen it, you hate it, you tweak the program, you run it again. Mostly you wait.

As I waited I had the TV on, and from time to time I would flicker through the channels, all ninety of them. I got bits of a gardening show from Minneapolis, a KKK speech from Bakersfield, some sumo wrestling from Yokahama, ten or twenty political roundtables in various languages (for some reason my set had closed captions in Russian), three sitcoms, four car crashers,

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North African weather, reruns of *Kojak, I Love Lucy, Gilligan's Island, Bonanza, Dallas, Star Traders*—I was grateful when the phone rang.

Without thinking, I answered it. "Patchett Productions."

"Not after this Friday." Merinov didn't even try to hide the sadistic glee in his voice. The sneaky son of a bitch had placed the call himself rather than going through his secretary. I'd gotten good at fooling his secretary.

"Hello, Oliver." I was surprised I could speak at all. "Can't find any orphans to kick today, huh?"

"Just my two trainee orphans, Little Brian and Baby China. Ah, me. It is my sad duty to remind you that you'll be out on Mr. Street five days from now unless, through some miracle, you manage to deliver *Reap the Wild Wind.* My sources tell me you are far, far away. Heavy sigh."

"You *knew* we were given an impossible schedule in the first place, with *no* allowance for downtime, then you let that god-damn—"

"Language, please."

I tried to relax. "Your own distribution people changed our delivery date because your wonder girl Waterman couldn't deliver that vampire ninja monstrosity—"

"Brian. Brian, baby."

"Language, please." I wasn't about to let Merinov start calling me "baby."

He dropped the pseudo-bantering tone. "Okay, then, Mr. Patchett. Waterman's situation has nothing to do with yours, is that clear? You and China and the overdue *Reap the Wild Wind* are all I'm discussing here, and as Vice President of Business Affairs, I'm informing you that per our deal memo dated January 13 this year, you are now in breach and have been given the customary notice—before we sue your nasty little ass for payback."

"Payback! Since when does anybody get sued for payback?"

"Read your deal memo. Standard clause."

"Yeah, but—"

"But, but. Take care now." He hung up.

China had watched the last few minutes from the doorway. He's older than me by a couple of years—he must be at least thirty—a stereotypical hack animator, pale, pudgy, nervous. "Bad news, huh?"

"Let's just say I hope you kept up with your union dues." China would be all right no matter what happened to Patchett Produc-

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tions. A veteran scanimator, which in this town means anyone who knows head crash from head cheese and can point to a week's experience, could always find steady work.

His expression didn't change. "That sucks," he said finally.

"Yeah, doesn't it." I found myself staring out the window with a growing urge to take a nap, which, my doctor tells me, is my body's way of telling me it's ready for death. No, not yet. I had rent due the first. Besides, I really couldn't let a chiseling bastard like Merinov run me into the ground. "I guess I should have been nicer to Merinov's sister."

Donna Merinov and I had worked together as associate producers on one of Intergal's "reality" shows, *Jaws Assassin,* which is about this killer shark hired by a jealous husband to . . . oh, never mind.

"What did you do?" China asked. "Hook her on smack?"

"I was years too late for that. No, I think she just didn't like the fact that I managed to get out of that crummy job and into a good one before she did. And without having relatives in the business, either." Just thinking about the unfairness of it got me all worked up.

"Well," I said, "we aren't finished yet. We know and they know that if we can turn in *Wind* by this Friday, even in rough, there's no way they can sue for failure to deliver—" I looked at China. "What did you come here to tell me, anyway?"

"Write down this phone number: 555-2020."

I've learned to humor scanimators. I did so. "Okay. What for?"

"It's the Suicide Prevention Hotline."

I didn't like the sound of that. "China—"

He reached around the door and produced a familiar object. "What are you doing with the floppy?" I said. "We use hard discs."

He winced. "This *is* a hard disc. It was, I mean." He couldn't look me in the eye. "There's some kind of hardware problem."

"China, have I ever told you how your ability to understate is exceeded only by your sense of timing?" He looked hurt. I felt bad about that—not nearly as bad as I felt about the hardware problems. My career and my business were crumbling around me. I looked at that Suicide Prevention Hotline number a couple of times. I felt very tired.

After a while I looked up. China hadn't left. "What do we do now, boss?"

I was about to suggest that we employ an ancient Albanian remedy and start drinking heavily, but the phone rang again.

I just stared at it. It rang twice more. "Aren't you going to

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answer that?" China said. Sweat beaded his upper lip. One of these days we're going to have a chat about the man-machine interface—who serves whom.

"All right." I picked up the receiver.

It was the voice of an angel from on high. "Hi, Brian? It's Allison Danch."

"Allison! What a pleasant surprise. I was just thinking about you." God help me, I really said that.

China rolled his eyes and left the room.

"I wanted to thank you for lunch today, and for your . . . honesty."

"I've got a better idea," I said. "Why don't I take you to dinner? I'm even more honest at dinner."

(Hollywood Rule #2: When you're going down the toilet, take someone along.)

"I guess there's a little of the old Hollywood left after all," Allison said, rolling off me and climbing out of the bed.

"Stick with me, baby, you'll be in pictures." She laughed. I propped myself up on one elbow and watched. Allison peered out my second-floor window, the lights from passing cars strobing her. I decided I liked Allison a lot. We had had dinner, and drinks, and listened to mutual tales of woe. A truck went by and the whole place quaked. Wonderful.

"So that's what it was," Allison said, smiling at me, arching a lovely eyebrow.

"Hmm?"

"The earth moves . . . whenever a truck passes."

"Your pillow talk needs polishing."

She bent down and kissed me. "All right," I said, "you're forgiven."

She laughed and lay down, letting me fold her in my arms. "Would you be offended," she said, "if I told you I was a little surprised?"

"About *this?*"

"Oh no! I knew from the moment we met that we'd be interested in each other, sexually."

"Lust at first sight."

"More like compatible pheromone profiles. No," she went on, settling back with her hands behind her head, "I meant I was surprised at your *place.*"

"This? It's a typical two-bedroom townhouse apartment, cheap even for North Hollywod. There aren't a lot of these left, you know, after the Quake."

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"What happened to the mansions, or penthouse condos or even those goofy little houses on stilts you used to see on TV all the time?"

"The mansions that survived are mostly owned by foreigners and baseball players now. I can't afford a penthouse condo. The stilt houses became garbage when the shaking started. Didn't you believe me when I told you this was the 'new Hollywood'? We're technicians, Allison, the same kind of people you'll find in San Jose or Boston—only not as rich."

She turned to look at me, and there was genuine perplexity in her eyes. "Then why do you stay here?"

"There's a story that must go back to vaudeville—stop me if you've heard it—about a guy named Morrie who worked at the Palladium as a janitor. If you know anything about vaudeville you know that they had dozens of acts on a bill, comics, singers, burlesque, and animals."

"Oh God."

"Yeah, you've got it. Morrie's job was to shovel elephant shit off the stage. The rest of the work wasn't that hot, either. I mean, they paid him in rice, beans, and peanuts and he had to sleep backstage with the rats. . . .

"Anyway, one day, while there was a break in the action, Morrie gets into a conversation with a guy we'll call Jack, who politely asks him, 'How's it going?'

" 'It's the pits,' Morrie tells Jack. 'Not only do I gotta listen to these schmucks all day, but they pay me peanuts and I never get a day off and I gotta room with the rats—and whenever they have an animal act, I gotta sweep up the shit.'

"Well, Jack is *touched* by this, I'm not kidding. He fumbles in his pocket for his business card and presses it into Morrie's hand, says, 'Morrie, I'm a bigshot, I got my own company; come and see me Monday and I'll get you out of this rathole. I'll give you a job making cardboard boxes; the pay's good and the hours are short.'

"Morrie just looks at him. '*What?* And give up show biz?' "

Allison had the grace to laugh. She gave me a whack with the pillow. "Seriously, Brian."

"I *was* serious," I said. I was still a little high or I probably wouldn't have done what I did then. "Come on." I got out of bed and went into number two bedroom, the "office," where I keep my trades and my computer. In the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet, underneath a four-year-old stack of *Hollywood Reporters,* I found a manila envelope with an inch-thick wad of paper inside. I handed it to Allison.

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"What on earth is this?"

"My screenplay. I wrote it before I came out here."

"I thought you didn't have any of that 'old Hollywood nostalgia.' "

"I lied."

"That's what I like about you, Brian. You're honest about your dishonesty."

She took the script out of the envelope. "Catchy title, isn't it?" I said. "*Epiphany in Blood.* Boy meets girl, boy tries to chop girl into little bits—"

"What?"

"So I was trying to be commercial. Anyway, it never sold and it never will for several perfectly good reasons, not the least of which is that no one makes these kinds of movies any more."

She was reading the first page as she sat down in my old stuffed chair. Naked, hair spilling across her breasts, long legs tucked underneath, she was a recruiting poster for heterosexuality. I nibbled on her neck. "Do you want me to read this or not?" she said.

Now here's an interesting choice: would a failed writer be more eager for a luscious lovely tumble or to have somebody read his work?

"Turn out the light when you come back to bed," I told her.

"No way," I said to Allison. I was still panting. "Too much sex has completely warped your judgment." We were five minutes past the climax of Act Two, action—among other things—falling, dawn breaking. Allison repeated her obscene suggestion:

"But why couldn't you tape your own script and deliver that to Intergalactic?"

"You don't understand the way things work—"

"Don't patronize me, Brian."

"Let me rephrase that. I know what you're thinking and it makes me very nervous. I don't think we could get away with it."

We both stared at the ceiling for a moment. Finally Allison said, "Just let me read your deal memo."

"Okay, if you'd like. It's at the office."

"Can't you call it up on your IBM?"

So there we were again, two naked people padding around a cluttered office, peering into a terminal. Allison was beginning to remind me of an IRS agent. I think it was the distinctive vertical furrows that had appeared on her forehead; maybe it was

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the unholy glee with which she exclaimed, "You've got 'em by the shorts, Brian! Look at this."

I leaned over her freckled shoulder. To be perfectly honest, I'd never really read my own deal memo, having left that chore to Sidney the Agent. It was his *job*, wasn't it? "If I'm getting this right," Allison said, "and I spent two years in pre-law . . ."

"I didn't know that."

"Well, I was on a Minority Rights track, which didn't work out. But I got an A in contracts. Whatever. You are legally required to deliver, by this Friday, one ninety-minute program titled *Reap the Wild Wind* to Intergalactic Studios, at which time you will receive the delivery money, which is half the license fee Sidney your Agent negotiated for you. Nowhere in this memo or in the standard contract is there any reference to the *content* of *Reap the Wild Wind,* am I right?"

"Look, technically I could deliver ninety minutes of recorded organ music and a home movie—but, Allison, I'd like to work in this town again."

"Okay, worst case. What will non-delivery do to your future if Intergalatic decides to be to-the-letter?"

"So it'll be a little tough . . ."

"Meaning that while no one will hold the non-delivery against you, no one will be anxious to hire you, knowing that Intergalactic is probably suing you for two million bucks."

"True, that sort of thing tends to inflate the below-the-line figure."

"Okay, then. What about this? Was it you or Intergalatic that acquired the rights to *Reap the Wild Wind?"*

"Me, as Patchett Productions."

"Can you afford to repay the two million dollars you've already received from Intergalactic?"

"Look around you."

She bit her lip. "I imagine you're also overextended on credit without the final delivery money."

"Computer time is hideously expensive. There ought to be a law against that."

"Brian, what the hell are you *waiting* for?" She raised her head and brushed back her hair. "Partners?"

She had a point. "Lovers," I said, and kissed her.

Unfortunately, Allison and China got off to a rocky start:

"What kind of a name is 'China Coat Morgan'?" she said. She was trying to be funny, really.

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China frowned and mumbled something about how it had to do with being born in the Sixties.

"I'd have killed my parents for doing something like that."

Right then I hustled Allison into the next office. "We *need* China," I told her. "He's wired into the video underground. He can get us cameras and crew. I can't and I don't think you can."

"Okay, okay." She forced a smile. "I'm sorry, Brian, I guess I just got so excited. Nothing we were saying to him seemed to be penetrating."

"China's like that."

"Where on earth did you find him?"

"Department of Corrections sent him to me on a work release program."

Her eyes widened. "He was in *prison?* What for?"

"Murdered his parents when he was fifteen."

From that point on things went better. We found a suitable stage—it was currently in use as an exercise studio—and rented it on credit. China came through with a crew and appropriate technical support. As for the cast, I phoned Sidney the Agent, who just *happened* to know a couple of out-of-work kids who were modelling and doing small theater. That's where we got our male lead, a piece of prime U.S. grade A-1 beefcake named Kent Something.

Somehow the female lead turned out to be Allison.

There was no time for major script changes, not that we had any in mind . . . all we could hope to do was cut down on the number of sets, which turned out to be three ordinary rooms, which, added to a pair of everyday outdoor locations (a park and a McDonald's) meant that we spent close to nothing in time and money on construction.

We started production on Wednesday afternoon, block and tape (doing every scene until we got it right), editing as we went, and by Thursday night we had ninety-four minutes of story called *Reap the Wild Wind,* aka *Epiphany in Blood.* A Patchett-Danch Production for Intergalactic.

Friday afternoon at five I had a Rocket messenger drop the stipulated-by-deal-memo master and clean dupe at Intergal and put the phones on record.

Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney had nothing on us.

We didn't come up for air until Monday. I had given China my one good credit card and told him to go as far as it would take him, that we would send a warning if it became necessary for him

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to leave the country, so the office was empty when Allison and I arrived.

I'd never seen a phone machine with so many messages on it. One of them was from Sidney the Agent. Sixty-nine of them were from Oliver Merinov.

"He must have called every hour since Friday," Allison said, awed.

The early messages, the first fifteen or so, were merely nasty: "Patchett, before you commit honorable *seppuku,* call me so I can decide whether or not to sue your heirs. . . . I know you're in there, Patchett. Come out with your hands up. . . . Who are you trying to kid, Patchett?" Etc. From that point they descended into lunacy, and rapidly thereafter into incoherent grunts of rage.

"Wow," I said, "I'm not looking forward to this."

"Why would he be mad at you for delivering the picture? That *is* what he wanted, isn't it?"

"You've got to understand studio politics. Merinov inherited this project, hence he gets no credit if it works, but a lot of blame if it bombs. Worse yet, he probably already told his finance people that they won't have to give me the delivery money, which is a two-million-dollar mistake and makes him look like an utter fool. What are you doing with that phone?".

Damn her, Allison was already punching a number. "Mr. Merinov's office," she said in a precise, secretarial voice. She made a face at me while listening. "Oh, thank you very much."

"Merinov is on his way over here with the sheriff, isn't he?"

"Merinov is on his way to a screening room to look at *Reap the Wild Wind* with his boss and Intergal's lawyers." She picked up her purse.

"Where are you going?"

"To your screening, Brian."

There's an old joke about the tall black building that houses Intergalactic's corporate management, that it works just like the monolith in the movie *2001,* with this difference: put your hands on it and you get *stupid.*

Now, I'd done two earlier projects for Intergal and found them no worse and no better than other studios, but I couldn't help thinking about that joke as we drove up.

The screening had just started when we walked in. For the first time in my life, I saw the whole process *stop*—instantaneously the picture disappeared and the lights went on and six people in business suits stared at us.

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One of them was Merinov, sitting in the middle of three down front. He glanced at us for a single nuclear moment, then picked up the phone and said, "Start from the beginning, please."

Allison and I scrambled to find seats as the lights went out. Once we'd settled she held my hand.

I needed it:

INT. DARLENE'S BEDROOM—NIGHT

Music is playing softly. A breeze ruffles the curtains in the open window. Darlene enters from the bathroom, brushing out her hair as she walks. She is wearing a clingy robe and not much else.

CUT TO:

EXT DARLENE'S WINDOW—(HANDHELD)

Branches partially block the view, but they are brutally pushed aside by a huge hand. We are aware of the sound of heavy breathing. The camera freezes on Darlene's window, and through a very skillful lighting effect we see her figure silhouetted in the clingy robe. The *phone rings*. The camera quickly pulls back from the window, though we keep Darlene in view as she answers the phone.

DARLENE

Yes? Oh, hello, Don . . .
Of course I've heard about
the acetylene torch slayer.
We all have to stick
together at a time like
this. I'll be right over
just as soon as I finish
my shower. 'Bye!

Darlene hangs up.

INT. DARLENE'S BEDROOM

Looking toward the window now and a shadow lurking out there. Oblivious to danger, Darlene crosses the shot on her way to the shower. She sings some silly song. As the music takes on an ominous note, the camera zooms toward the window . . . we hold a beat . . . suddenly an acetylene torch FLARES!

"Oh, Christ," someone down front moaned. I didn't think it sounded like Merinov. I sneaked a glance at Allison, hoping that my face, which burned with mortification, was now glowing in

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the dark. Allison was as oblivious to me as her screen character was to the low-tech killer outside her room. Maybe not: Allison was saying the lines along with "Darlene," and anticipating all the tension cues, giving happy signals with her body as they passed. She saw me watching her and reached out to grasp my hand again. I think there were tears of joy in her eyes.

It made me feel pretty good, actually.

Some months later the lights went on again. The ensuing silence was broken only by the rustling of half a dozen people shifting uncomfortably in plush seats. I saw Merinov bow his head toward his northern neighbor for a whispered exchange, then to the south for another. Three pairs of eyes then aimed themselves in our direction. Merinov's neighbors got up and, nodding to the three retainers further back, filed out. Finally Merinov himself left his seat and, eyes cast down, hands in the pockets of his expensive suit, walked over to where we sat. He *passed* us and plopped down immediately behind Allison. "Please," he said, "don't turn around! I don't want to see your faces."

Part of me traveled instantaneously back through time to seventh grade, when I'd been caught with some, shall we say, spicy pictures in my desk, and I knew for the first time in my life that I was in deep, public trouble, and there was no way out.

Merinov never raised his voice, never allowed himself a hint of sarcasm or annoyance. He might have been discussing real estate. "I must tell you honestly, Brian, and you, too, Miss Danch, that I hate this product. Now, please understand that hate is a word which has unfortunately been devalued around studios over the years. I myself used it in another context this morning. So consider my frustration with a language that does not contain a word that adequately describes a state of mind that . . . that transcends hatred."

"How about hatred-squared?" I suggested.

"Brian, please don't interrupt. It adds nothing to your negligible charm. To continue: I hate this project. I hate it, first of all, because it is not the project I wanted to see . . . it is not *Reap the Wild Wind*. I do not see my stars, the reason we made a deal. I hate disappointment like that.

"Second, and I'll grant you this is a totally subjective reaction on my part, I hate it because *you* did it, Brian. You have been the source of my disappointment and, I'll be honest, a certain amount of embarrassment for me *vis a vis* my staff. I have not liked you since before I met you, Brian. I have found you to be arrogant,

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unwilling to listen to advice, reluctant to pay your dues. Did I mention arrogant? Your mistreatment of my sister is only a small part of this, though you must admit it was a helpful focus. One might even say it was a catalyst.

"However, personal dislike has never been a major obstacle to a career, providing you can *deliver*. It is those who are disliked *and* fail to deliver who are doubly damned.

"But I would even forgive you your inability to deliver what I want, as well as your massive personal shortcomings, but for this: I am a sensitive man. I deplore violence. I do not like to be frightened. I will walk out of a theater, I will turn off my television set, if I see gore, blood, spatter, if I am made to feel afraid. There is . . . fear in this movie. Fear brought upon me by characters with the brainpower of a formica tabletop. No. No."

I sat through this, my eyes locked on the empty screen, stunned. Finally I managed to choke out a few syllables. "Well, there's nothing like a strong esthetic response—"

"I'm not finished, Brian."

"Sorry."

"Thank you. The ultimate horror, you see, is that I must *release* this travesty. I have a schedule to meet. There are distributors all over the country—all over the world—with whom this company has contracted to deliver product, and because scanimators have a truly deplorable inability to adhere to contracted delivery dates—a comment by you at this point, Brian, would be quite unproductive." I had prepared a snide comment on the Waterman project and the well-known unlikelihood that Intergal would *ever* see it. I held it. "Because of the gaping hole in our schedule, this *thing* must be part of our package.

"Had I another project that could be rushed forward to delivery, I would have *Reap the Wild Wind* erased. I would have the master tape and its duplicate broken down atomically . . . but I can't." I sensed that Merinov had gotten to his feet, a feeling that was confirmed when I felt his hot breath on the back on my neck. "But I will *not* forget this. And I will make *very* sure that *your* name is on this project when it's released. The critics and the public will need a scanning electron microscope to find the name of Intergalactic Studios on it."

CONFIDENTIAL RESUME
Brian Troy Patchett

May 1995 to date — Executive Producer, Patchett Prdns.
Reap the Wild Blood, an Intergalactic Film, 1996

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Jan. 1993 to May 1995 Intergalactic Studios
Jaws Assassin, 1995 (Associate Producer) [VBO/NBI series]
Vampire of Saturn's Moons, 1993-4 (Associate Producer) [ABD series]

Dec. 1991 to Jan. 1993 St. Croix Productions
Casablanca '93 (Production Assistant)
Smokey and the Bandit Go To Hell (Production Assistant)
Taxi Driver Starring John W. Hinckley, Jr. (Production Assistant)

Hollywood Rule #3: Nobody ever gets a decent job from a resume. Emphasis, however, is on the word *decent.* Even as the studio made plans to put *Reap the Wild Blood* into release, it simultaneously sued me both as an individual and in my corporate persona for breach and damages . . . neither of which I could pay, had I been so inclined, since the delivery money (which Intergal had only released because they needed the good will of Sidney the Agent) had disappeared into a black hole of old bills, debt service, and China's back salary. What *really* annoyed me is that Intergal had no case, no chance of winning, and they knew it . . . they just wanted me to go broke defending myself.

Well, I was already broke. I was poison. I could only hope that some stupid cable company, preferably one with a religious affiliation and based in a foreign country, might hire me for a development job. Worst of all, by the day of the scheduled premiere I had a zit in the middle of my forehead from overdosing on chocolate chocolate chip ice cream.

"I'm not going," I announced to Allison about six o'clock that evening.

"Of course you're going, Brian," she said gently. She was already dressed to kill—but subtly.

"What's the point? They're only opening the thing because they *have* to. It's not like anyone there *believes* in it."

"Brian, dearest darling, who *cares* why they're releasing the picture? The fact is they *are.* It will be seen by people and they will pay for the opportunity."

"I'm not so sure about that. No one has done a new movie with new faces in it for about ten years, and no one but me is complaining. It's just going to be awful—"

Allison started rubbing my head. "Look, Brian, you and I have been through a lot in the past few weeks. We've had some ups

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and we've had some downs. I think we've gotten to know each other fairly well."

"Mmmm," I said. "Don't stop."

"So will you cut the shit? It's obvious to me, and it should be obvious to you, that you really believe that the heart of theater is people responding to other people. You've hated scanimating from the day you started. You saw one chance to fight back and you took it. Be proud."

"How can I be proud of a schlock horror movie? Okay, maybe you're right, maybe I wanted to make some sort of political statement and got myself into a situation where I could make it . . . but right now I can't see why someone would want to pay ten bucks to see *Reap the Wild Blood* when he could see Lon Chaney, Jr., in *The Thing.*"

Allison ran into the bathroom.

I gave her a couple of minutes, then slunk after her. She was crying. "I'm sorry, honey," I said.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I understand. I honestly do. It's been an unpleasant experience for you all along. Tonight would only open the old wounds. It was cruel and thoughtless of me to even suggest that we go. I'll get cleaned up." She tried to shoo me out of the bathroom.

"Not so fast." It was my turn to be contrite. "If anyone's being cruel and thoughtless around here, it's me. I told you when we first met that I didn't give a rat's ass for 'art,' and I should at least have the decency to be consistent. I've been saying all along that I don't care what the people in this town think."

"Brian—"

"But I do care about *you,* Allison. You're *in* this movie. Hell, you're the first new Hollywood starlet in ten years. You *deserve* one big night . . . just like Marilyn Monroe or Jean Harlow. You need a healthy, dim-witted stud in a tux for an escort, too, so get out of here and let me get made up."

She locked her arms around me then and we wound up falling against the door with a loud thump. And I was the recipient of the most enthusiastic kiss I've had since I was sixteen.

"Thank you, Brian," Allison said. "I'll never forget you for this."

"I won't let you." As she was leaving I asked, "Do you have anything that'll cover a forehead zit?"

For years the joke has been that the movie theater never died, it just multiplied and moved inside. *Reap the Wild Blood* opened on a football Monday at the Pacoima Galleria.

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The crowd was better than I expected, which isn't saying much. The house was at least half full and though a majority of the attendees were friends of China's (recent and possibly future parolees, from the looks of them), there was a sprinkling of civilians. Even some execs from Intergal. Kent Something shook Allison's hand when we walked in and gave me a big kiss. It was hardly searchlights-in-front-of-the-Chinese, but everyone was politely optimistic. Then the movie started.

I had neglected to script anything to go under the main title and had had to improvise a sequence at the last minute without much thought. What I had come up with was, I hoped, a nice bit of characterization. See, the acetylene torch killer, played by Kent S., had to be established right away as a bit of a klutz. Not an Oh-God-what-a-pitiful-wretch kind of klutz . . . just your ordinary, everyday kind of klutz. I needed it because Kent was handsome in a brittle way and didn't look much like a guy whose life is not going right.

So I had asked Kent to fool around in the bachelor-bare kitchen of my apartment (it took about a minute to strip it completely) and try to open a can of frozen Welch's grape juice . . . with no utensils. It was great. He tried to pry the lid off with his fingernails, then he banged the can against the counter top, and then—to suggest that our torch killer might be a bit more unwrapped than the average klutz—he *bit* the can. He kept biting the can until the damn thing opened, by which time he had a bloody mouth.

The audience exploded into laughter, even those who knew it was coming. From that point on, everything got weird. People laughed all the way through the first co-ed slaying and the big chase through the streets of North Hollywood, right through the scene where poor Allison/Darlene's shower becomes a steam bath. My first reaction was extreme mortification, but Allison squeezed my hand and said, "It's perfect!"

Eventually the lights came on and people crawled out of their seats. Some of them were actually weak with laughter. I heard a couple of lines being quoted back and forth. Not being terminally slow on the uptake, I was ready when my back was slapped and the words "comic masterpiece" were said. I just smiled condescendingly and mumbled that there just wasn't enough humor in horror any more.

Oliver Merinov appeared out of the crowd and solemnly shook my hand. "It'll do well, my friend. Let's have lunch tomorrow." Well, who could say no to that?

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It took me quite a while to get out of there that night. Oh, I wasn't fighting off the crowds . . . I was watching Allison signing autographs.

She was loving every minute of it.

It was the first time I'd been inside Gulliver since the day I took Allison to lunch.

"Charming place," Merinov said, after the "waiter" took our order—salad for him, lobster for me.

"You'd say that if we were roasting weenies in Hell, Ollie." I had decided to call him Ollie from now on.

"It takes a certain amount of personal diplomacy to survive in any business, Brian, especially one like this, which deals so much in intangibles." He gave me a look which was intended, I think, to make me feel that he had just shared a warm, intimate revelation.

"You aren't going to suggest that that's an area I need to work on, are you?"

He spread his hands. "You're young, you're irreverent, and you've had too much success too early. You've never been put in a position where you were forced to be diplomatic."

"I must say, Ollie, that you have. Considering your well-known . . . antipathy toward me personally, and the somewhat strained tone of our last meeting—Jesus, I'm just amazed that you can stand to be in the same building with me, much less buy me lunch."

Fortunately the food arrived about then, saving him a polite, diplomatic reply. It was delivered by one of the holographic waiters, I noticed with some astonishment. My jaw must have dropped open. "Is everything all right?" Merinov asked.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, fine." I made a tentative dig at the meal. I'd ordered lobster just to tweak Merinov and suddenly didn't want it. Heavy sauces and heavy conversation are a bad combination.

"As you know, Brian," Merinov said presently—and he actually looked uncomfortable—"personal animosities have to take second place to business considerations. I'll be frank—Intergalactic has revised its judgment of the potential of *Reap the Wild Blood*. We think it might do rather well, actually. We think there's a place again for the live action film with new faces and new stories."

"Either we've gotten good word of mouth on last night's premiere or you've done some major testing."

"Both. You see, Brian, we feel that you—your way of making movies—is the wave of the future in this business. As you've

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said—" I hadn't, in fact. "—we can't go on endlessly recycling past product in new packages. That way lies sterility and creative death."

"Not to mention a steadily decreasing market share with the resulting financial problems."

"Exactly." He didn't catch the sarcasm.

I wanted to laugh. Out of considerable desperation I'd gone far out on a limb to do a project "the old-fashioned way," and now this very definitely new-fashioned corporation had decided I was right. "Well, he said cautiously, what do you want from me?" I said.

Merinov's eyes gleamed. "We're prepared to offer you a substantial commitment—say, three play-or-pay projects over the next three years, all-new stories with all-new stars, done your way. Exclusively for Intergalactic at very competitive rates of compensation."

There it was. The keys to the kingdom. How would I like to become the George Lucas of the next decade (whatever it is you call the decade between the Nineties and the Teens)? Working for Intergal? "You guys amaze me, Ollie. So you've gone and tested this project in which you were, if I recall, extremely disappointed, and found that you were wrong. I must admit, I've had worse apologies. But I agree with you—I'm too young, and, uh, too irreverent for Intergalactic. Sorry, Ollie, thanks for asking."

If I expected a reaction of shock or anger or surprise—and I suppose I did—I didn't get it. Merinov merely smiled. "You have integrity. We respect that. Let's finish our lunch and talk again . . . later."

I told Allison about Merinov's offer as soon as I got home. Her response was immediate and genuine: "Who needs Intergalactic anyway? If the movie is a hit, everyone in town will want to work with you and you can name your own price and structure your own deal. If the movie *doesn't* make it, they'd just find some way to squirm out of the offer."

It was just what I needed to hear.

By Thursday night, however, she was having second thoughts, which took the form of wistful musing: "Do you suppose Intergal would have let you film on location somewhere like France? . . . Just how much money was Merinov ready to offer? . . . You know, Brian, one of these days you're going to *have* to start thinking about our future." Our future.

I was having second thoughts of my own, of course. My response

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was to eat all of the chocolate chocolate chip ice cream in North Hollywood.

By Saturday we were no longer speaking. It made for a rough weekend.

On Monday Allison moved out.

Well, we had that nice premiere and we got one good review in the trades and the movie opened strong, and that was *it* for *Reap the Wild Blood.* By the end of the month it was so dead, commercially and otherwise, that Intergal's distribution arm unloaded it on a pay TV service so obscure it didn't have a name—unless you consider the Upper Wisconsin Community Broadcasting System a name—and *they* ran it at three in the morning.

Allison signed with Sidney the Agent for "personal representation" the day she moved out. She was pretty busy for the next month . . . which had to be why she didn't have time to return any of my two-hundred-and-fifteen phone calls. She's in Hawaii now, I hear, doing a live action movie for another studio.

China took some of his back pay and bought himself a new name. From now on I have to call him IBM Splits Again Morgan. Splits for short.

I've got a nice new office on the Intergal lot, right in the shadow of Oliver Merinov. Oh yeah: they signed me to that three-picture deal. The fact that *Reap the Wild Blood* bombed made absolutely no difference to Intergal—research told them that Brian Patchett was the wave of the future, and they weren't going to let a little thing like audience reaction tell them otherwise.

Intergal is still suing me, of course. Hollywood Rule #4: Sue the guy with the money and make him settle. If you thought they'd reconsider just because they needed my future good will, you haven't been paying attention.

Anyway, China—excuse me, Splits and I spend a lot of our time in my new office with our friends . . . some holographic Lilliputians that I swiped from Gulliver. You'd simply be amazed at what these little guys can do, given the right random number programming. It makes a good show, though you can bet Intergal management will hate it. We're about ready to turn 'em loose.

What? And give up show biz? ●

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(from page 31)

SOLUTIONS TO THE ROAD TO MANDALAY

1. The numeral 5 will appear 16 times. Did you forget it appears twice in 55?

2. The answer is 23. Not many people can count them all without drawing up a list.

3. It takes longer to make the round trip in any kind of constant wind, blowing in any constant direction. I made the mistake of not realizing that when a car is slowed by a head wind, it is slowed for a *longer time* than it is boosted when it goes the other way with a tail wind. This played a crucial role in the famous Michelson-Morley experiment that confirmed relativity theory by finding that the round-trip speed of light is not influenced by an "ether wind."

4. Remove one nut from each of the other wheels and use them for the wheel you are changing.

5. After 10,000 km, each wheel has traveled that distance, making a total of 40,000 km for the four wheels. If five tires are used equally on the wheels, each tire has endured 40,000/5 or 8,000 km of wear.

6. A car following another car, that never exceeds the speed limit, can slow down, then easily exceed the speed limit in catching up.

7. Forty fence posts. Most people visualize the four corner posts, with eight posts in between on each side, for a total of 36.

8. One quarter, nine dimes, and four pennies make 14 coins that won't change a dollar bill.

9. One: a silver dollar. The next best answer is six: one half-dollar, one quarter, one dime, and three nickels.

"How about switching my memory to linguistics," suggested the car. "I'll give you a few word puzzles for a change."

"Good idea," I said, as I twiddled the dials.

1. "I'm a car, you're a man. Both *car* and *man* spell with three letters. I don't have many parts that are three-letter words—*fan*, for instance—but you have lots of them. Can you name ten parts of your body that spell with three letters?"

I couldn't get beyond nine.

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2. We passed a sign that read: "Slow. Road Construction Ahead." Said the car: "Can you think of two words of *opposite* meaning, each of which can be put after the word *slow* to make a two-word sign, and in both cases the sign will say exactly the *same* thing?"

3. "I'm called the Hustle. There is just one way to rearrange those six letters of my name to make another familiar word. What is it?"

4. "*Continuum* has two adjacent U's. Give another common word with two adjacent U's. It's easy. In fact, there's nothing to it."

5. "What unusual word has three U's, not necessarily adjacent?"

If any of the above questions stump you, check page 119.

WASHOE: TWO MEMORIES

Like a toddler in Montessori school,
Tracing sandpaper letters,
The Gardners guide each gesture
And regesture until the sign for "funny"
Implants—billions of neural alternators
Juicing rootlets to her hippocampus.

She laughs in the planets of her eyes,
Pleading to be tickled silly
By tracing the venal tributaries
On the backwoods landscape of her hand—
Deaf talk, mind to mind
With her interspecial companions.

—Robert Frazier

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by Warren Wagar

Although he is a history professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton, the author says his only connection with this story is that he, too, is "absence" minded. His book credits include *H.G. Wells and the World State* (Yale University Press) and *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things* (Indiana University Press).

HEART'S DESIRE

art: Nicholas Jainschigg

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I am slow to unravel problems, but people have always given me credit for empathy. Show me a human being in anguish, and in five minutes I can tell you just what he's feeling. I may not understand why. I may even miss the obvious. But I can pick up the vibrations of his pain and play them back again, as if the pain were mine.

This is sometimes an inconvenient gift. Watching my brother die of cancer was like dying of cancer myself. I was criticized for being away so much. No one knew!

But empathy is priceless if your object is to seduce young women of good character. They want a man to be understanding. I never fail them.

Only once in my life has the power of empathy opened a window through which I could not see. Or rather, I saw, and saw clearly; but none of it makes any sense.

At the start of last October my travels took me to Ithaca, where my old buddy Charles Merton lives with his enchantingly beautiful wife Amy. Charles—it has always been Charles—is a Cornell professor of note in the microcosm of scholarship, and someone I have known for twenty years, since we were both freshmen at Williams.

He had been married once before, and divorced after a decade of misery, much like myself. But Amy Forbes! That was quite a different matter. A woman of devastating loveliness, with pale golden hair, and the riveting calm of Greek sculpture. I had met her only a few times, when Charles was courting her, but she was impossible to forget.

Some women have expressive features. They hold one's attention by all sorts of swift nervous feminine gestures. They seldom photograph well.

Amy is not such a woman. She would have been the perfect artist's model. She never seems to move. She walks effortlessly—as it were, motionlessly. Her eyes are bright blue gemstones. Her stock in trade is the paralyzing gaze, the languorous coiled pose with one leg tucked under her, the long silences when everyone else is frantically jabbering, the occasional droll sarcasm, directed to no one in particular. I had her marked, in those courting days, as a rather dangerous woman, something of a tease, cool-hearted, perhaps—who knew?—bitchy. I was afraid for Charles, the classically lonely divorced man, easily taken in, easily played for a fool.

"Don't you worry," he whispered in my ear at some interminable faculty cocktail party or other. "She loves me. Really loves me."

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Just then Amy came up with a quizzical look, slipped her arm into his, and led him away to the canapes, glancing over her shoulder at me with a smile that I could not have deciphered if my life depended on it.

My attempts to get closer to Amy, to understand what she was all about, left me unconvinced. Clearly, Charles caught her interest. His devotion was doglike. But what else could have attracted her? After child support payments to his first wife, and contributions to the maintenance of an aged father in a nursing home, Charles could not have been worth more than fifteen thousand a year when they married. He was not handsome. He was not amusing. At thirty-seven, he was twelve years her senior.

She reminded me in those days of a beautiful fairy, a seductress of mortals who plays with their passions for a night or two, and then one cold morning slips away into the forest and vanishes forever.

Even during the courtship she kept another bedazzled Cornell faculty member on her string, an arrangement Charles knew all about. She told him on their first night together.

At any rate, Charles and Amy did marry. I got the wedding invitation when I was in London, and for more than a year I had no chance to visit the blissful couple. But Charles's letters painted a picture of felicity like a canvas by Raphael. His life had become symmetrical and serene.

I hoped it was true. Entirely true. Whatever his failings, Charles Merton had earned a civilized middle age.

But I will freely admit that I expected nothing of the sort, as my car crawled up the tree-lined hills of Ithaca, searching for Charles's new house. I even caught myself turning a few consoling phrases over in my mind, just in case they were needed.

Amy met me at the front door.

Although she is not quite my type, she took the breath right out of me. Her smile was warm, her eyes were a blue blaze, full of a friendly candor that I had not remembered. We exchanged kisses on the cheek at her initiative.

"Did you have any trouble finding us?" she asked, taking my coat.

I mumbled something, but before I had finished, there was Charles, ten or twenty pounds heavier than ever in his life, beaming at me through his bifocals, pumping my hand with honest pleasure. He seemed the ideal happy husband, well fed and cared for, in a homemade sweater that must have been Amy's work.

"How do we look—as Mr. and Mrs., I mean?"

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He put his arm around Amy and squeezed her to him.

The old Amy might have dodged away, but now she only stood there, on display. She seemed even more beautiful, more radiantly golden than the year before.

"Do you want the truth?" I asked.

"Great is truth, and it will prevail," he grinned, translating a Latin tag that had been part of our arrogant banter in college.

"Okay," I laughed. "Obviously I can't fight the blessed memory of Problems of Philosophy. You two are as much an item married as you were unmarried. What did they put in that wedding cake?"

A long silence ensued, which became almost embarrassing. I was struck by the intensity of Charles's feelings, and even Amy's. He wanted very badly to convince me, from our first moments together. So, much to my surprise, did she.

But then he let her go, to fetch a round of drinks, and we were soon settled in a cozy living room, Charles and Amy together on the sofa, and I sunk into a well-upholstered lounge chair with my feet up, rambling on about my business trips.

"Aren't you ever going to find a roost of your own, Fred?" Charles asked.

"A roost?"

"You know—a home, a hearth, your own version of Amy."

He kissed her ear, invisible to me in the cloud of fresh-washed gold that framed her face.

"You've had the luck for both of us," I smiled. "How many Amys do you think there are on this godforsaken planet?"

"Just one," he said, quietly. "Just one."

"Well, there's your answer," I replied, finishing my drink in a single long gulp.

The evening progressed satisfactorily for all of us, except that I had the world's worst time getting Charles to myself. Without actually clinging, Amy managed to be there with him almost every moment, and he did nothing to push her away, God knows.

Even dinner gave her no problem. It was nearly all ready, requiring only two or three short visits to the kitchen, and Charles—a cook in his own right—trotted behind her each time, to lend a hand.

Only once were they apart, and on that occasion, Charles had to leave, not Amy. The telephone called him away after dinner, as we were sipping our cognacs.

At first the conversation flowed normally. Amy was telling me about Charles's new book, the one I suspected he would never write. Sure enough, he had still not done even a page. But his

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research plans had proliferated, and Amy gave every appearance of knowing his inmost thoughts.

"You really understand what he's up to," I said.

"I hope so. We talk a great deal about his work."

"Not exactly the modern approach to marriage, is it?"

I was fishing, and she knew it.

"Definitions of 'modern' keep changing," she said, showing no offense. "It's not as if I had no work of my own."

"You're still pecking away at that dissertation?"

"Oh, yes. More than pecking. It's half done now."

"Brava!" I smiled, lifting my glass in salute, with a soupçon of sarcasm in my voice that I regretted immediately.

Still, she took no offense.

The drone of Charles's conversation stopped, as he went upstairs to get a reference for his caller.

To assuage my guilty conscience, I told Amy a story about a dissertation that one of our youngest profs at Williams had been writing, which nobody expected him to finish. Of course, as academic fates would have it, he did finish, and the thing got published, and won some obscure but thoroughly respectable award.

I was so intent on telling the story properly that I did not notice at first the expression on her face.

It was—how shall I say?—strangely vacant.

Her eyes, so bright before, had dimmed. Even that magnificent crown of yellow hair looked, all at once, more white than golden. It must have been a trick of the subdued after-dinner lighting in the room.

"Are you all right?" I said.

She smiled faintly, but did not speak.

"I mean, you don't seem to be quite yourself."

Her smile lingered. I thought, insanely, of the Cheshire Cat. Was her face only a smile? I could see that delicious red line so clearly, but for a moment or two, nothing else.

Well, Amy was always famous for her hypnotic powers. So calm and still herself, she could put any vulnerable man in a trance with just one long look.

The spell was broken by the sound of Charles's foot steps on the stairs.

"I'm fine," she said.

I caught her eyes again, and the blue fire was back, unmistakably. Her hair came alive as she turned to smile at Charles.

But the empath in me sensed that something was wrong.

Not just Amy's lapse into a queer mood, or her illness, or what-

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ever. Something was missing. She was diminished, if not physically, then psychically. Charles, too.

Was this the price to be paid for a happy marriage? Who am I to say? I had never known a "happy" marriage, never seen an example of it with my own eyes.

But the fear grew in me, that pleasant evening. For two people to live together in contentment, did each have to lose himself, to make room for the other self? Did the perfect match require a sort of mutual suicide?

Or what if Amy were only play-acting? An elaborate game, to keep Charles distracted, while she went about her own dirty business on the side?

None of this rang true, I must admit. Not then, or now. Amy may have been spoiled, but she was not duplicitous, and she was not one for suicide, metaphorically or otherwise.

Nevertheless, I went to bed oddly troubled.

There was no rational basis for it.

Charles was happy. Amy was—if not happy, at least far from unhappy. They had all too plainly achieved an attunement with each other that could not be argued away.

I fell asleep wishing my own life could be so dull.

The next morning, at breakfast in the music room, with the sun brilliant outside, and maple leaves spilling in the strong autumn breeze, I finally had Charles to myself.

"All right, let's hear it," he said, as he poured me a glass of orange juice.

I looked at him poker-faced.

"I know something is nagging you, Fred."

I sipped my juice, thinking how to begin.

He smiled. "We haven't been friends all this time for nothing. You're worried. Probably about me."

"Well," I said, after another longish pause, "not worried, actually. Call it baffled."

"Ho, ho! A mystery!"

His mood was invincibly bright.

"Yes indeed," I went on. "A damned mystery. I came here braced to find an anxious husband trying to placate an imperious wife, or making excuses for her absence, or confiding in me that things weren't quite . . ."

"Weren't quite working out?"

"More or less."

"And instead?"

"Instead, I see the perfect match. Two cooing doves."

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Charles laughed.

"You must be very disappointed."

I made a face. "Don't be dense. I have no urge to play nursemaid or shrink or marriage counsellor. If you're both happy, then great."

"But if we're not?"

"Charles, you *are* happy. You're both happy. I can see that. The only thing that confuses me is the change in Amy."

"Change? I hope you don't mean her looks. I think she's more beautiful than ever."

He went to the kitchen window and stared a long while at something in the garden.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and tried to explain my thoughts about Amy, how she had become so withdrawn, even passive, not at all the spiky self-possessed woman I remembered too well.

Charles stayed at the window all the while I was stumbling through my speech. I began to feel foolish, although there was no doubt in my mind that I had to say something.

Finally, I was through, and Charles sauntered over to the table and sat down facing me again.

"Fred, Fred, Fred," he said, gently. "Dear old, good old Fred."

"I'm not that old!" I laughed.

"No, you're not."

He glanced down at the table for a moment. Then his eyes met mine squarely.

"Look, Fred, look, I'm not the uxorious moron you may have figured me for. Amy and I would never have made it as a couple if she hadn't been willing to come off her high horse."

"I didn't say anything about a high horse."

"No, but you wanted to. You know as well as I do that she played games with every man she met, before she married me. Sexual power games. Flirting with other men to keep her lover on his toes. Making erotic overtures to get her way. Turning cold after she did. You could never trust her."

I felt my eyes widening.

"So you see I'm not a dummy. Amy didn't fool me. I worked around her faults, because I could tell that she had the potential to grow into somebody much better. It was just a matter of time. Time, and the right chemistry in the relationship. We were lucky."

"How much time did it take?"

"Good question. Actually, the first few months were pretty much what you must have expected. We had troubles."

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For a moment, Charles lost his cheerful composure. I could see a flicker of pain in his eyes.

"Fred, she left me."

I waited for him to explain.

"In January, right after Christmas. She started dropping hints about Mark Rogow, you know, the TV scientist with all the hair. They met at a faculty party. I don't know what happened."

"And then?"

"And then she came back. It took her just over a week. I prayed, Fred."

"You what?"

"Yes, prayed. I certainly don't know who or what I thought was listening. But I prayed. I put every hope, every wish, every childhood memory of religion, I put them all together, and I prayed for her to come back. I knew we were right for each other. I knew we could be happy."

He chuckled. "And it worked. Oh, not really. I don't believe in magic any more than you do. But she did come back."

"Had she been staying with Rogow?"

"No idea. I absolutely refused to ask. What matters is that she came back. She said she was sorry, wanted another chance. And in that one week, in that one bloody week I spent praying, she had grown into a woman. She seemed five years older. At peace with herself. At peace with the world. We cried together for almost an hour the first night."

I finished my coffee. Charles smiled at me with so much innocent warmth that I felt compelled to smile in return. Not obliged. Compelled.

Once again he strolled to the window.

I followed him.

"Look," he said, softly.

I gazed into his garden, dotted with recently fallen leaves, but still recognizably a flower garden, in the English style. It all meant very little to me. I have never been able to tell one plant from another.

"How do you persuade flowers to bloom in October?" I asked.

"No, look," he said again, with an undertow of urgency in his voice. He gripped my elbow, so hard that I almost complained.

His eyes were fixed on a stand of tall plants with large yellow flowers, which I could not identify.

"They could be giant daisies," I said, uncertainly.

His grip did not relent.

I blinked and laughed. All at once there was Amy, just straight-

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ening up. She must have been tending the yellow flowers. The green silk of her housecoat and the spun gold of her hair blended perfectly with stem and flower, so that one could hardly tell the difference. She was like a great yellow butterfly, a veritable force of nature.

She looked up at that moment and waved and smiled.

"Have you ever seen such a sight?" Charles asked, in a low voice, as if he were talking to himself.

He relaxed his hold on my elbow, and gave me an uncharacteristic clap on the back.

"Fred, stop worrying, man."

"You mean that, don't you?"

"Never more serious. Is it a deal?"

He was, you could say, irresistible.

"Deal," I replied.

And that was the end of it. Amy soon came indoors, and the three of us began to plot our day's doings.

I realize that I have cast all this in the form of a story, for anyone to pick up and read, so I wish I could say that something more happened during my visit with Charles and Amy.

Nothing did.

That is, nothing sinister. Nothing to throw any light on the "mystery."

In fact, all the rest of our time together convinced me that if anything sinister lurked in the house of Charles and Amy Merton, it was dear old, good old Fred. I grew ashamed of my suspicions. Worse yet, I started to feel like a character out of a novel by Henry James, one of those late-Victorian gentlemen of middling age who dodge forever and ever around the Jamesian mulberry bush, half-drunk on subtleties and nuances that amount—in the final tabulation—to a great whacking zero.

Our last day together consisted of an outing to Watkins Glen. We dined at noon on a diet of modified health food at a rustic lodge near the Glen, and roamed all the well-worn paths like a trio of gawking tourists. It was fun, of a kind I thought I had left behind many years ago.

Near twilight, I fell behind my companions, slipping into a momentary trance in the soft autumn woods, staring at a bed of brown and amber leaves, feeling sleepy and useless and inert.

They went on ahead, to the footbridge suspended over the gorge.

I poked among the leaves with a fallen branch.

Then I walked on a bit further. I had no doubt they had crossed

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the bridge, but for some reason I could not make my legs move in anything but slow motion.

The world seemed to spin more slowly, too.

But there was a murmuring sound, of low voices, speaking tenderly. I found myself almost at the bridge when I saw Charles and Amy just a few yards away, standing on the bridge itself, face to face, tightly clasped.

The world stopped spinning altogether.

"I love you," Amy said. "Charles, I know, I know now what you wanted, and I want it. I want it, too."

Her voice was the voice of the larks in the last of the *Last Songs* of Strauss, climbing dreamily into the haze as the sky grows dark.

Charles kissed her, fiercely.

I took a deep breath, and they heard me.

"Come here," said Amy, with no hint of coquetry in her voice. Her eyes, even in that failing light, were intensely blue, and her hair was as warm as the sun itself.

"Yes, for God's sake, come here," Charles chimed in.

I could not have hesitated for any power on earth.

They held out their arms. In an instant, I joined them, and they surrounded me, and we all hugged each other.

I felt their love surging, like a nuclear explosion. It grew all around me, until I could imagine for a timeless flash of time that I was Charles and I was Amy and all the lovers who had ever loved.

No one kissed. It was not necessary.

The footbridge trembled, as other tourists entered it from the opposite side.

The last sordid scrap of my doubts washed away.

Charles loved Amy. Amy loved Charles. They were heartmates. For the rest of their natural days.

In early December I was back in London, feeling out of sorts, and drinking with an English friend of Charles's in his Kensington flat.

I did not particularly like the fellow, but I sought him out, chiefly (I suppose) to exchange news of Charles.

The evening went slowly. He droned on and on, about the bloody Common Market, and the bloody Falklands, and the bloody Tories.

Halfway through our second bottle of Fino the conversation turned at last to Charles. I started to tell him about my visit.

His head jerked up and he looked me in the eye.

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"What do you bloody mean, Amy? Amy Forbes?"

"Well, they are man and wife," I smiled, a bit weakly. "Charles says she turned over a new leaf, and believe me, she's done just that."

He slapped his knee and laughed. "Right—and pigs have wings."

"People can change."

"Some can."

He paused and lowered his voice. "Dear chap, didn't you know? Amy ran off with the TV scientist last winter and she's been his live-in mistress ever since."

I froze in my chair.

"But Charles got her to come back!"

"If wishing could make it so, I dare say he would have. But facts are facts. I can even prove it. Rogow and Amy were in London together. Quite recently it was."

"No!"

He shrugged. "See for yourself."

He rummaged through a pile of tabloids, which cluttered the bottom shelf of his bookcase.

"I really should chuck all this rubbish," he apologized. "But I have a fondness for gossip."

Finally, he pounced on just the right issue.

The story appeared on page three. Famous TV scientist Mark Rogow, lecturer at Cornell University in the U.S.A., narrowly escapes injury in crash.

"Anyone you recognize?" my acquaintance asked, with an alcoholic sneer.

The story was illustrated.

My eyes swam into focus. The first face I saw was that of Rogow, crumpled and pudgy and unmistakably himself, with his patented woolly mountain of hair, grinning into the camera.

Next to him was the blonde effulgence of Amy Forbes.

"American TV personality and best-selling science writer Mark Rogow, with his traveling companion Amy Forbes."

They had been in a nasty accident on the M1, but both escaped with only cuts and bruises.

I glanced at the date, October 3. The day after I arrived in Ithaca to visit Charles.

"That's not possible," I said. "October 3 was when . . ."

"When what?"

"Nothing."

"You look poorly," he said.

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I did feel suddenly cold.

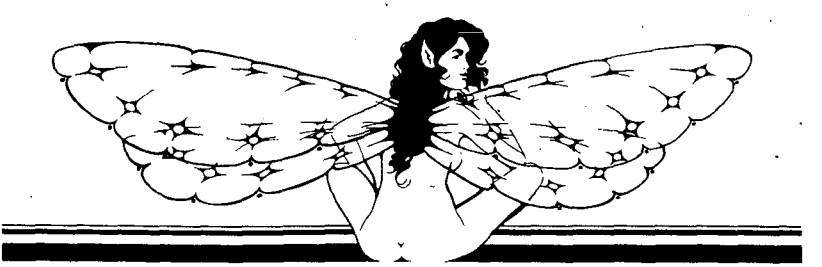
I was frightened, almost to death. I am still frightened.

I keep remembering the time after dinner, when Charles went upstairs and I was alone with her, and she—what can I say? —thinned out. Or the queer way she popped into view in the garden, as if Charles had *willed* her to exist.

The man was simply in love. A hopeless case.

All the same, I am frightened.

It is curious, to be so frightened of the power of love. ●



NEXT ISSUE

Our August issue sports another beautiful cover by Japanese artist Hisaki Yasuda. The cover story, "Realtime," is a romantic adventure tale by Daniel Keys Moran and Gladys Prebehalla. We'll also have stories by Frederik Pohl, George Alec Effinger, Barbara Owens, Damien Broderick, and others. Pick up your copy, on sale July 3, 1984.

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by Marc Laidlow

THE RANDOM MAN

art: Arthur George

The author, who was last seen in our May issue with "Buzzy Gone Blue," says he is now working full time on a novel. In his spare time he enjoys the guitar, song-writing and cartooning.

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Milt Random had put a few beers under his belt, sitting alone in his dark little apartment, when he noticed that the grains of his wooden coffee table were subtly rearranging themselves. Blinking through his alcoholic haze, Milt cleared away the magazines and ashtrays that littered the table, and peered closely at the scarred surface:

RANDOM

His name. Written in the wood grain, right there on his coffee table. Too many beers.

But . . . more words were forming themselves around the first:

U R LIVING N A RANDOM UNIVERZ

Milt belched. The coffee table shifted:

N E THING CAN HAPPEN

"Uh-oh," Milt said. There was no one to hear him but the table.

WUTS WRONG

Milt stood quickly, went into the kitchen for a sponge, and came back to scrub at the elusive words. As he touched the table with the sponge, there was a sudden rearrangement of wood grain. Everything was normal again. Milt sighed, set aside the sponge, and reached for his half-full Coors.

It was no longer a Coors.

It was a *Dont be afraid.*

Milt dropped the can and stared. The patterns on the plaster wall were going wild:

U R THE CHOZEN RANDOM

Shift: CHOZEN AT RANDOM

Shift: MILT RANDOM

Milt was doing his best to ignore the writing, hoping that it would just go away. He stared at his hand, thinking that surely his own body was inviolable.

Wrong. His freckles were migrating into an undeniable message:

WUTS WRONG MILT

"My freckles are talking to me."

They shifted back into scattered obscurity. The air at his ear began to buzz, forming words—a clear speaking voice with perhaps a touch of a Swedish accent:

"Don't be scared, Milt," it said. "Yust relax."

"I'm trying," Milt gasped.

"Dere's really nothing you can do."

"Why are you talking to me?"

"No particular reason, it's yust happening. Given a random universe, it's perfectly plausible, though the florts are against it."

"The whats?"

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"I meant 'odds.' It's hard to get all the words right when everything is just a fluke."

The voice buzzed away. Glowing letters bobbed in the air before his eyes, sparkling:

4 INSTANZ IF ALL THE AIR IN THE ROOM MOVED SIMULULTANEOUSELY INTO 1 CORNER YOU WUD SUFOCATE ITS POSSIBLE

"You've got some spelling problems," Milt said.

SO DO 5000000 MONKEES

"You mean all this is happening coincidentally?"

RITE UP 2 THEEZE LETTERS

AND THOZE

THOSE 2

"I get the idea."

"Anything can happen," whispered the fallen magazines, pages flapping. "So let's make a deal."

"A deal?"

"We represent chaos, right? Well, we need a human agent."

"Me?"

"Who else?"

Milt's clothes suddenly curled and reshaped themselves around his body. He was garbed in an outlandish superhero costume—knee-high boots, velvet-lined cape, rakish hood.

U LOOK GOOD IN BLACK, said the shag carpet.

"Yeah," said Milt, liking the idea immediately. "I can see it in print!"

The ceiling, reading his mind, spelled in bold letters:

MILT RANDOM: AGENT OF CHAOZ

"But you'd better do something about your spelling," Milt said.

WUT DO U SAY

"Sure," said Milt. "Why not? If I've been chosen at random, why not?" He paused. "Say, does that mean I can do anything?"

SURE. The chrome letters on the Westinghouse this time.

"Fly?"

Milt felt a rippling in his shoulders. Huge wings unfolded from his back. He spread them across the living room.

"Wow. And big muscles?"

Milt felt himself growing larger, swelling . . . suddenly there was an odd twisting amid his molecular components. A scattering.

THE ODDZ WERE AGAINST IT, the silverware opined.

Milt was gone, spreading in a fine dust of randomly scattered particles. The cloud eddied about a bit, flowed over couch and coffee table, drifted at last onto the floor. Its last random drifting said:

OOPZ ●

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THE VEXATION OF PERCIVAL LOWELL'S SIGHT

From lip to lip like swallowtails
visiting the blooming mouths of milkweed,
news of Schiaparelli's *canali*
crossed the Atlantic to Boston in 1877,
and Lowell's shuttered
imagination snapped
instantly awake as does an eye
on the early vacationing light
in a summer cottage at Cape Cod.

Pioneering the exodus for clarity
in observational science,
Lowell housed his 24-incher on Mars Hill,
brooding above the pure Arizona sand.
Mornings his breath warmed stiff fingers
as they channelled his sightings
into the lined spaces of notebooks
and the unlined reaches
of his cerebellum.

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As with Schiaparelli and a few others,
Percival saw in those rare focal moments
the seamwork of fancy
which masked the red face of Mars.
There was another steamy Panama
and more Erie courses.
and hundreds of other Martian waterworks
like the chains of the sea, link to link.

What prosody vexed Lowell's sight?
There were the tall Ancients,
their once prospering world dying to dust,
with only the vast coronary bypasses
to move needed water.
And to move blood through the earthen dreams
of aspiring engineers
and surgeons with bookshelves of Burroughs and Wells.

What species of clot formed
between the falcon-sharp eye of Percival
and his scientific sensibilities?
Around him his peers tied questions into bows
and the years unravelled backwards.
His vision lost its edge,
but never its willingness
to see.

Has dust erased scars of some Martian Tycho?
Did microbes bloom in some unclocked alignment?
There are no granite-hard answers . . .
only the sample arm of Viking 1,
the ultimate extension of Lowell's fascination for life.
Only the ethereal grip of his vexation
that still holds each astronomer in brief thrall
when first sighting their lens on Barsoom.

—Robert Frazier

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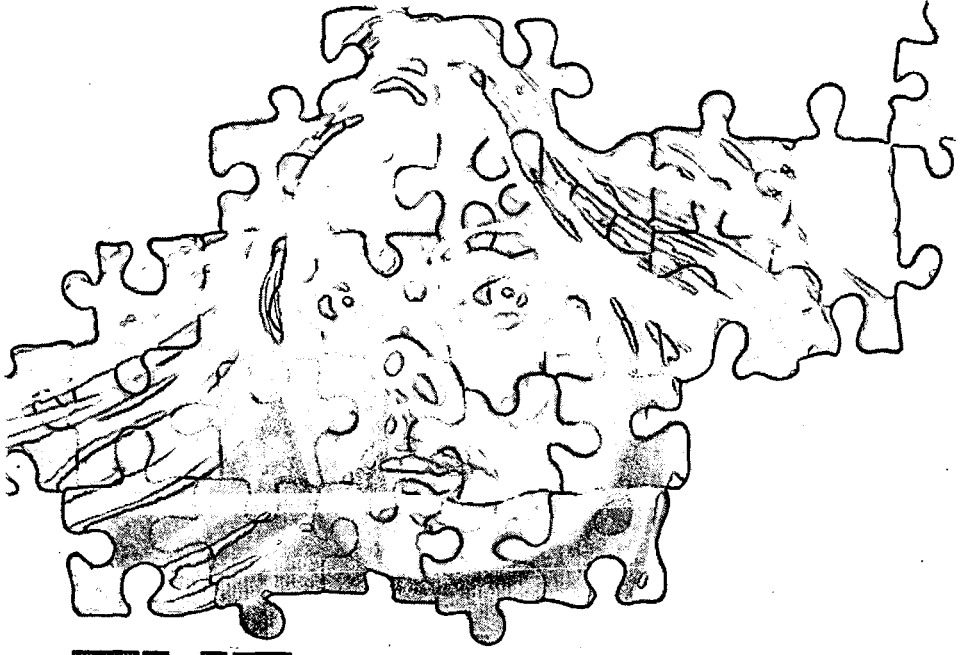

art: Robert McMahon

THE ASSEMBLAGE OF KRISTIN

by James Morrow

The author's first science fiction novel, *The Wine of Violence*, was published by Ace in 1982. His second, *The Continent of Lies*, is just out from Holt, Rinehart, & Winston. "The Assemblage of Kristin" marks his first appearance in *IAsfm*.

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Welcome to the Kristin Alcott Society. No, that is premature. Congratulations on your nomination to the Kristin Alcott Society. Naturally we hope that you intend to join us. In the event of doubt, this rare and forbidden document should prove useful.

To the outside world, it is inexplicable that a man who hates water would sacrifice a prime week of his summer vacation attempting to swim, that a woman who is repulsed by contemporary music would pass the same vacation week listening to the entire *oeuvre* of the rock group called Tinker's Damn, or that—in my own case—a fifth-grade mathematics teacher with a creativity quotient barely equal to his body temperature would squander seven precious days of August sunshine throwing clay pots. But you know why we do these things. You know that we're not out to improve our minds, or to raise our consciousnesses, or any such glup. We have a covenant with Kristin Alcott, and we intend to keep it.

By recounting the unfortunate fate of the ex-Kristinite, Wesley Ransom, I hope to make a difficult decision easier for you. I hope to show you that for every precious privilege of membership in the Kristin Alcott Society, there is an equally precious responsibility.

That particular summer, I was the last to arrive for Kristin Week. This is typical of me. Stepping out of my glider, I raised my eyes toward the bluff and its solitary house, which Kristin had named Wet Heaven. Gnawed by salt air, lashed by breeze and spray, Wet Heaven occupied an impeccable location. Its back yard was a pine forest. Its front yard was the Atlantic Ocean. My nostrils expanded, eager for the Cape Cod air. The tangy particles buffered my throat. Waves rolled in, breaking against the rocks with thick hard whispers.

I hiked up the bluff, walked through the wind-smoothed grass, creaked across the veranda. Imprints of Kristin were everywhere. Her collection of kitschy pictures—a calendar infested with kittens, a watercolor of a child mesmerized by a bunny—cluttered the walls. Over the fireplace, a painted beer tray showed the highly dental face of the Hollywood actor Rainsford Spawn.

I gave myself a Cook's tour. Our other members, I soon discovered, had already set about their duties. Jagged notes of recorded rock music—the notorious Tinker's Damn album called *Flesh Before Breakfast*—lanced through the door to Maggie Teach's room. By nightfall, I knew, the poor woman would have the audile equivalent of eyestrain and a prolific case of diarrhea. Noting that the door to Lisha DuPreen's room was also closed, I surmised

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that she was endeavoring to make love to whichever young man she had imported for the purpose. During the rest of the year, as it happened, Lisha DuPreen had little use for sex. She was not maladjusted, nor unemotional. She simply didn't like the stuff.

I peeked in the basement. Sure enough, Kendra Kelty had set up her holodisk player and was attempting to engross herself in an old Rainsford Spawn movie. The title was *The Last Aztec.* Kendra Kelty thought that every picture Rainsford Spawn had ever made was a colossal bore and that Rainsford Spawn himself was a misogynist and a Nazi. Kendra suffered in silence.

I returned to the living room. Dr. Dorn Markle, the Kristinite who hated water—who believed that to venture ten feet into the Atlantic was to court deadly undercurrents and offer oneself to entire platoons of sharks—had just returned from his swim. Droplets spilled from his body, making ephemeral stains on the hardwood floors. His was the misery of a wet cat. We exchanged greetings.

"Hi, Dorn." I extended my donated hand, the one the surgeon had stitched on to me.

"Howdy." Dorn had wondrous eyes: large, luminous, green. He was a walking advertisement for his optometry business.

A handshake.

"Scrumptious weather," I said.

"Hope it lasts till Sunday," he replied.

Profound conversation was rare during Kristin Week.

I went onto the veranda. Billy Silk, who was both physiologically and morally allergic to alcoholic beverages, sat on a chaise lounge, sipping apricot wine. Wesley Ransom hobbled over. Wesley despised all things athletic. He found any form of exercise loathsome. He had been out jogging.

The pain on Wesley's face, I could tell, did not owe entirely to his recent run. The man harbored troubled thoughts.

"Greetings, Billy. Salutations, John." Martyr's sweat rolled down Wesley's face. "Glad I accosted you two together. There's a matter we should discuss. A matter most dire."

Salutations, accosted, a matter most dire: this was the kind of diction Wesley Ransom was always concocting for himself. He couldn't get over being an actor.

"Dire?" Billy poured wine into a plastic cup that had once belonged to Kristin. The cup had a teddy bear painted on it. I liked Billy. He was a vegetarian computer programmer who heard elves whispering amid the memory boards.

"It's like this," said Wesley. "The Society doesn't mean anything

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to me any more, not a rat's ass. I don't believe in it. It's . . . unreasonable."

Billy, the spiritual one, was more offended than I, the math teacher. "It hurts to hear such talk from you, Wesley. You of all people—with that heart of yours—should know how decent our—"

"Here's the nub of it, conferees. I'm quitting."

I guess Billy had emptied Kristin's teddy bear cup once too often, because he actually began to sob. "You *can't* leave. Think of what you're saying. Think of Kristin, for God's sake."

"We need a formal meeting," I offered, trying to sound neutral but inwardly sharing Billy's horror. "All eight of us. Together."

Wesley licked sweat from the gutter of his upper lip. "Tonight? After dinner?"

"Tonight," moaned Billy. "After dinner," he wailed.

New York City, they say, is the place on our planet where you are most likely to run into someone you know. At the time I ran into Kendra Kelty, of course, I did not know that I knew her, nor did she know that she knew me.

We were in the Port Authority Whirlybus Terminal. I was bound for Boston, having recently endured a math teachers' conference called "Einstein, General Relativity, and the Fifth Grade." Kendra was returning to Philadelphia. She played in the orchestra. She was a flutist or, as smug people say, a flautist. All around us, itinerant peddlers hawked worthless wrist computers and dubious ash trays. Derelicts hugged the tiled walls, talking to friends who weren't there.

I was drawn to Kendra from the first moment I saw her. Fleshly sparks united us. It was not a sexual attraction—not in its essence—though surely that was part of it. Her mouth was so erotic it should have been clothed.

We abandoned our respective lines spontaneously and in perfect synchronization. Pretending to look hungry, we went to a vending machine. Kendra inserted a fistful of quarters, pushed a button, obtained a watercress sandwich that she did not want to eat and a cup of coffee that she did not want to drink. She was at once svelte and earthy, qualities I had previously thought were mutually exclusive.

When my turn came, the mechanized cornucopia gave me a candy bar, a fig stick, an apple, and some carbonated iced tea.

"Your hands don't match," was the first thing Kendra Kelty ever said to me.

"Very observant," I replied. "This is the hand I was born with,"

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I continued, touching her shoulder tentatively with my right index finger. "And this one"—I removed the peeweeputer that concealed the scar encircling my left wrist—"comes from an organ bank."

"What happened?"

"Shark."

"A shark?"

"No. In truth, a boring dog bite followed by a boring infection followed by a boring transplant."

An irrefutable fact was hanging in the air: neither of us would be going to our respective home cities that night.

"I'm not all myself either," confessed Kendra Kelty. "Look into my eyes."

"I've done that."

"Look closer."

I did. Kendra's left eye was the green of jade. Her right was the green of algaberry soup.

"Glider crash," she said, touching her left tear duct. "A sliver of glass. The whole shebang had to come out, retina included, plus nerves and a gob of visual cortex. It took them two months to locate a match this good."

We ventured into the nocturnal city. Forty-Second Street was a loud and ghoulish bazaar. Flashing lights. Flesh for sale. Pay as you come. We talked, testing our rapport. When a loud scream issued from the nearest sex boutique, I put my arm around Kendra. The sparks between us grew hotter.

That same night, Wesley Ransom joined our company. Kendra and I were in a twenty-four hour cafe called The Holistic Donut. The waitress was rude. Wesley entered on the run. He rushed to us like a nail being sucked to a magnet.

"I was way down in the Village," he panted. "The Fawnshaven *Lear* opens there tonight," he shouted, displaying his ticket. "And suddenly I find myself leaving the line"—his voice built to a shriek—"and *sprinting* uptown! I hate *sprinting!*" Wesley's was a life of noisy desperation.

"Let me try a wild guess," I said. "Part of you is not you."

"Correct," said Wesley.

"Which part?" I asked.

"Heart," said Wesley.

The truth was upon me now, scary and exhilarating as the sting of an opium hornet. "By any chance . . . the Morganfeller Organ Bank?"

"Quite so," Wesley replied.

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"On Twenty-Third Street?" I asked.
"Yes."
"Me too," said Kendra.
"Me too," said I.

Three entirely separate lives, unconnected cords of protoplasm and thought, one night intertwined by—by whom? Who was this donor whose eye and hand and heart we shared? We needed a base of operations—someplace more intimate than The Holistic Donut. A crumbug hotel, the Mackintosh on Sixty-First Street, was the only choice compatible with Wesley's budget. Wesley refused to become indebted to Kendra and me so early in our relationship. Out-of-work actors are prideful creatures. Room 256 was available. We took it. The cracked walls looked like floodplain maps. The three of us talked till dawn.

There are two kinds of secretaries in the world. Those who are so miserably unhelpful that you want to throttle them, and those who manifest a grasp of their institutions' inner workings so profound that their bosses would be doing well to know half as much. Luckily, it was the second type of secretary who answered our graphophone call to the Morganfeller Organ Bank.

"No," the secretary said, "our records are not confidential." She was a stately woman with gems implanted in her teeth. "This isn't an adoption agency. Au contraire—since Dr. Raskindle took over, we've been encouraging recipients to contact the families of donors."

"To express their gratitude?" Kendra asked.

The secretary nodded, flashed a garnet smile.

"That's what we want to do," I said hastily. "We want to express our gratitude."

The secretary told us what we needed to know. Our mutual benefactor, source of our implanted portions, was a twenty-year-old female named Kristin Alcott. She had drowned two years ago in the ocean off Cape Cod. Her brain had died totally; her other tissues came through unharmed.

Skeleton, kidneys, spleen, and a half-dozen other vitals were still at the Morganfeller Bank. The rest had been taken off ice and distributed.

"Any living relatives?" Kendra asked.

We learned of an elderly mother, Merribell Alcott, judged "eccentric" by the Morganfeller Bank's computer. A Chicago address, no graphophone number. We thanked the secretary and hung up.

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A critical mass had formed. Hour after hour, segments of Kristin began arriving at the Mackintosh Hotel, Room 256.

First came the optometrist, Dorn Markle. A fire had left him with burns over eighty percent of his body. Kristin's skin had fit Dr. Markle like a glove.

Billy Silk, our vegetarian computerist, appeared next. He had lost his tongue to a rare and recalcitrant form of cancer. Now he wagged Kristin's.

And then: Lisha DuPreen, who repaired whirlybuses for a living and who had Kristin's sexual organs.

Maggie Teach, who wrote murder-mysteries and enjoyed Kristin's ears.

Theresa Sinefinder, who ran a porpoise obedience school and who profited from her stomach.

For six uninterrupted hours we sat together in the room, staring at the fissured plaster, studying our cobbled bodies, and wondering what to do next.

"My daughter was full of life," Kristin Alcott's mother told us after we had assembled in her parlor. "Your tale is less fantastic than you might suppose."

Merribell Alcott exuded elegance and class. The intertwined lines on her face held the fascination of arabesque. Her voice had the pitch of wisdom. Kristin's mother dwelled among eight stray Chicago cats. And now we eight stray *memento mori* were coming home.

"When I say that my daughter was full of life," the wise old woman continued, "I am stating a literal fact, and wish to be taken as literally as if I had said, 'My daughter was a Capricorn,' or 'My daughter was left-handed,' or 'My daughter had red hair.' Perhaps you expect tears from me now—tears of joy, confusion . . . whatever. I will not give them. I am not . . . sentimental. What's happening here is not a transcendence of death but a shabby compromise with death. It's Kristin I want back, not some nebulous vibration of Kristin, and Kristin can never come back. Believe me, nothing in this situation will lessen my pain, so if my desires alone were all that counted, I would tell you to go your separate ways and never let your 'critical mass,' as you put it, form again. But, of course, the desires of another must be considered."

"Kristin's?" Theresa Sinefinder asked.

By way of answer, Merribell led us up the stairs, plucking cats from our path. The hallway was musty with antique lamps and

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oriental rugs. As we paused outside Kristin's door, I noted that we were aligned in anatomical order: skin, ears, eye, tongue, heart, stomach, vagina, hand.

"I have not entered this place for twenty years," Merribell informed us. "I will not enter it today. Everything here burns me."

Merribell vanished into a hall closet, reappeared holding a moist wad of permaclay.

"Which of you has my daughter's hand?" she asked.

I held up Kristin's hand.

"There is a potter's wheel near her bed," Merribell informed me.

"I know nothing about them," I said.

"Put the clay on the wheel head," Merribell said impatiently. "Turn on the motor. Press down. That's all. I don't expect a Greek vase, young man. Just press the clay."

Entering the room, I began carrying out my orders. A hologram of Kristin kept watch from above her bed. She had an angel's face, a sibyl's smile. She looked full of life.

"Concentrate on your hand," Merribell called to me when she heard the motor buzzing.

The wet clay sucked at my palm, oozed between my fingers, crept under my nails. My intellect found the sensation vaguely disquieting. And yet . . . and yet . . . and yet I could not deny it. My borrowed hand was glad. Its flesh tingled. Its receptors rejoiced.

I returned to the hallway, spoke up for Kristin's hand. How does one describe the gratitude and contentment of a hand? I discoursed slowly, without eloquence.

"And who has my daughter's ears?"

Maggie Teach stepped forward, received her orders. She was to enter the sanctum and listen to a tape that Kristin had recorded live—and illegally—during a Tinker's Damn concert. Maggie professed her loathing of Tinker's Damn. Merribell counseled her to let her ears decide.

"There was pleasure in my ears," Maggie admitted afterward. "Just in my ears," she hastened to add. "Nowhere else."

Eyes were next. The object of their affection: a poster over Kristin's bed of the film star Rainsford Spawn. When Kendra came out, she did not need to elaborate the romantic excitement experienced by her left eye. Its copious tears, unmatched on the right, told all.

"My daughter loved to jog," Merribell informed us. "She loved to feel her heart thumping inside her body."

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A job for Wesley Ransom, would-be actor, former arteriosclerosis victim, and enemy of all things athletic. He ran around the block, returned to the group, and articulated what it was like to defy one's mind in deference to one's heart.

"Tongue, skin, stomach, vagina," said Merribell. "We could test these, too, but it's clear now what we would find. Kristin enjoyed wine and ice-cream. She loved swimming and hot sun. She was a connoisseur of roller coaster rides, with a stomach that took pleasure in what many people find insufferable. And, finally, I must admit that my daughter was no stranger to sex."

Merribell opened a crinkled hand. A key lay at the intersection of her heart line and her head line. She gave it to me. Evidently she regarded me as the group's leader—a reasonable conclusion, when you consider that the human brain evolved pursuant to the ambitions of the human hand, or so I am told. "This key opens Kristin's favorite place," Merribell explained, "her grandmother's house on Cape Cod. Kristin spent joyous summers there. It was her second home. She called it Wet Heaven." The tears Merribell had forbidden herself were beginning to flow. "I would say that you owe her at least one week per year. I'm thinking of her youth, you see. She was so very, very . . . young."

The old woman sobbed. I told her that a week sounded reasonable.

And so the Kristin Alcott Society was born. That none of us enjoy the hobbies we practice for Kristin's sake is merely, I am sure, just one more dark coincidence in a universe filled with dark coincidences. Thus, at the beginning of Kristin Week, Kristin's stomach goes to the Barnstable County Fair and spends the day on a roller coaster that the owner of that stomach despises with every neuron of her consciousness. Kristin's tongue, sewn into a teetotaler, enjoys its favorite wine. Sitting in their respective hosts, her heart jogs, her vagina has sex, her hand throws pots, her ears hear Tinker's Damn, her eye sees Rainsford Spawn, and her skin plies the Atlantic and feels the cold soft bumps of its waves.

Of the eight of us, only Dorn Markle has attempted to explain the seeming efficacy of our sufferings. Dorn the Optometrist—the scientific member of our club.

"It all has to do with engrams," he lectured. "Memory traces are typically laid down in several different parts of the nervous system at once. When the same action is performed over and over, a kind of sub-brain forms in the relevant limb or organ. Evidently Kristin was preserved not only with all her tissues intact, but

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also with all her sub-brains intact. Her hand retains a rough memory of pot throwing. Her stomach knows the Barnstable County Fair roller coaster. Her skin wants the ocean. Engrams, you see? Redundant engrams, get it?"

I've never been sure whether I get it or not. Such a rationale is unimportant to me. I know only that when we eight Kristinites come together for our reluctant frolickings, a ninth is born, a young woman, and the woman has a good time, and that is enough.

Dinner that night was an orgy of dread. I have anticipated hospital stays and school-year openings with greater enthusiasm than I anticipated our meeting with Wesley Ransom. I picked at my lobster, prodded my salad.

We gathered in the living room. Wesley positioned himself by the woodpile. Theresa Sinefinder made a log construction in the fireplace but did not attempt to ignite it. Lisha DuPreen's lover sat on the stairway. The rest of us sprawled on the rug. Kendra and I touched thighs. We were falling in love.

"You all know how I feel," Wesley began. "We've been doing this for six years, doing it on faith. Well, man does not live by faith alone—not this man. There's a wife in my world now, and a baby. I have better ways to spend my summer."

"You'll have to tell me your definition of 'better' sometime, Wesley," snapped Lisha DuPreen. "It isn't *my* definition of 'better.' "

"To restore cherished earthly pleasures to one so unfairly deprived of them—what could be 'better'?" asked Billy Silk.

"You're forgetting about engrams," added Dorn Markle succinctly.

All that remained was for me to say, "You'd be dead if not for Kristin."

Wesley pulled his flaccid body to full height. "I shall always desire the best for Kristin"—his tone was indignant—"that's not the point. Engrams notwithstanding, there's simply no proof that our escapades do her any good. Keep the Society going if you want, but from now on you'll have to meet without me."

"You *know* that we become Kristin," asserted Maggie Teach. "You've *felt* the thrill in her heart. You've said so."

"People can convince themselves to feel almost anything, Maggie; I shouldn't need to tell you that. To be blunt, we're putting ourselves through a lot of pain for absolutely no reason. The word, I believe, is self-delusion."

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"Hail self-delusion!" shouted Lisha DuPreen, taking her lover by the hand and leading him up the stairs.

"I have a movie to watch," said Kendra Kelty, starting for the basement.

"I must get back to the fair," said Theresa Sinefinder, touching Kristin's stomach.

"My clay is getting dry," I asserted, waving Kristin's hand.

"A night swim would be nice," said Dorn Markle, stroking Kristin's skin.

"Any ice-cream left?" asked Billy Silk, sticking out Kristin's tongue.

Abandoned, betrayed, Wesley Ransom got in his glider and left Wet Heaven forever.

The rest of Kristin Week was a disaster. We performed our rituals: nothing. The feelings would not come. Kristin's hand lost its love of clay, her tongue became indifferent to ice-cream, her eye cooled in its passion for Rainsford Spawn, her ears grew numb to Tinker's Damn, her skin rebuffed the Atlantic, her stomach surrendered its autonomy and began corroborating Theresa Sinefinder's hatred of roller coasters. Without her heart, Kristin could not be conjured. Our flesh was willing but our spirit was weak. We went home two days early.

Wesley Ransom's death has never been adequately explained. The pertinent facts are three: his body washed up on a Hyannis beach, he died on the third day of Kristin Week, and drowning was the cause. Poor unathletic Wesley. When his family found out, there was some loose talk of foul play, but the truth will probably never be known.

Wesley's heart—Kristin's heart—was recovered intact. The Morganfeller Organ Bank got it. It went to one Jimmie Willins. Jimmie is young, he plays the banjo, and I laugh at almost everything he says. He has brought a certain *joie de vivre* to our gatherings. He says that joining our Society is the most worthwhile thing he has ever done. We expect that you will feel likewise.

As I said at the outset, we have a covenant with Kristin Alcott.

We are Kristin.

Welcome. ●

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(from page 90)

SECOND SOLUTIONS TO THE ROAD TO MANDALAY

1. Eye, ear, arm, leg, toe, lip, hip, rib, jaw, gum. Are there others?
2. *Slow up* and *slow down.*
3. *Sleuth.*
4. *Vacuum.*
5. *Unusual.*

"Let me try one on you," I said to the car. "How long is a Chinese science fiction writer."

"Bút that's a ridiculous question. Do you mean how tall?"

"It wasn't a question," I said. "It was a statement.* How Long contributes regularly to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine.* But you probably aren't programmed to appreciate puns."

The car was politely silent.

It was almost sunrise when I realized we were only about 20 km from my father's farm. "I'm going to turn your voice off," I said, "so you won't interrupt while I belt out 'The Road to Mandalay' in my deep, rich baritone. Do you like Kipling?"

"How should I know?" said the car. "I've never kippled."

Click.

My ballad was well timed. When I finished the last chorus, the dawn came up like thunder out of Tennessee across the Mississippi.

*My wife thought of a good answer to this if it is taken as a question: "A Chinese science fiction writer" is five words long.

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The Caribbean flavor of the following story comes from the author's firsthand experience. Like the character Ray, Mr. Shepard says that he too, used to "get around"—before he "started writing all this stuff." Another story in this series, "Black Coral," will appear in next year's *Universe* anthology.

by Lucius Shepard

art: Broeck Steadman

A TRAVELER'S TALE

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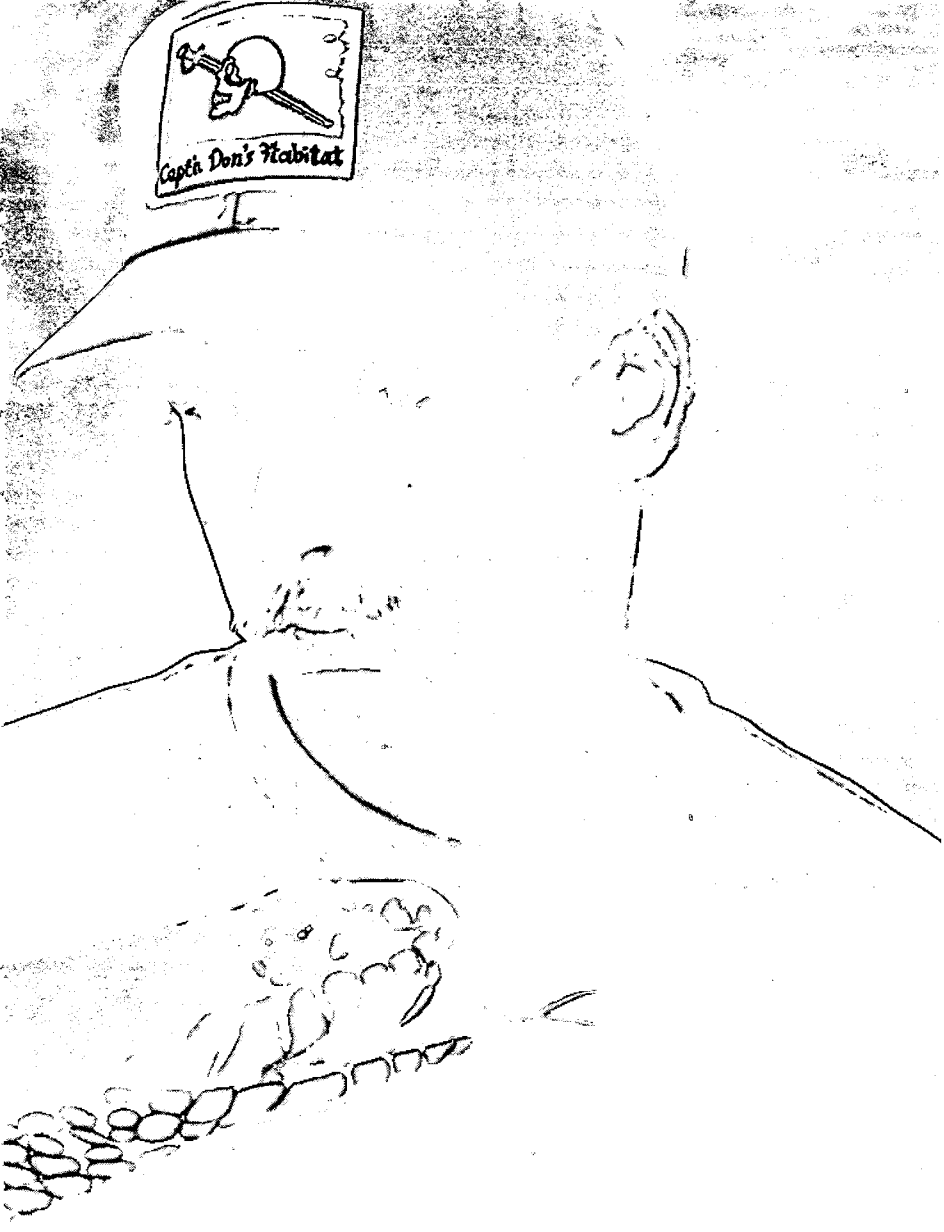

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All this happened several years ago on the island of Guanoja Menor, most of it to a young American named Ray Milliken. I doubt you will have heard of him, not unless you have been blessed with an exceptional memory and chanced to read the sketchy article about his colony printed by one of the national tabloids; but in these parts his name remains something to conjure with.

"Who were dat Yankee," a drunkard will say (the average Guanojan conversation incorporates at least one), "de one who lease de Buryin Ground and say he goin to bring down de space duppies?"

"Dat were Ray Milliken," will be the reply, and this invariably will initiate a round of stories revolving about the theme of Yankee foolishness, as if Ray's experiences were the central expression of such a history—which they well may be.

Most Americans one meets abroad seem to fall into types. I ascribe this to the fact that when we encounter a fellow countryman, we tend to exaggerate ourselves, to adopt categorizable modes of behavior, to advertise our classifiable eccentricities and political views, anything that may later prove a bone of contention, all so we may be more readily recognizable to the other. This tendency, I believe, bears upon our reputation for being people to whom time is a precious commodity; we do not want to waste a moment of our vacations or, as in the case of expatriates like myself, our retirements, by pursuing relationships based on a mistaken affinity. My type is of a grand tradition. Fifty-eight years old, with a paunch and a salt-and-pepper beard; retired from a government accounting job to this island off the coast of Honduras; once-divorced; now sharing my days with a daughter of the island, a twenty-year-old black girl named Elizabeth, whose cooking is indifferent but whose amatory performance never lacks enthusiasm. When I tally up these truths, I feel that my life has been triangulated by the works of Maugham, Greene, and Conrad. The Ex-Civil Servant Gone To Seed In A Squalid Tropic. And I look forward to evolving into a further type, a gray eminence, the sort of degenerate emeritus figure called upon to settle disputes over some trifling point of island lore.

"Better now you ask ol' Franklin Winship 'bout dat," they'll say. "De mon been here since de big storm in '78."

Ray's type, however, was of a more contemporary variety; he was one of those child-men who are to be found wandering the sun-struck ends of the earth, always seeming to be headed toward some rumored paradise, a beach said to be unspoiled, where they hope to achieve . . . something, the realization of a half-formed

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ambition whose criteria of peace and purity are so high as to guarantee failure. Travelers, they call themselves, and in truth, travel is their only area of expertise. They know the cheapest restaurant in Belize City, how to sleep for free on Buttermilk Key, the best sandalmaker in Panajachel; they have languished in Mexican jails, contracted dysentery while hiking through the wilds of Olancho, and been run out of various towns for drug abuse or lack of funds. But despite their knowledge and experience, they are curiously empty young men, methodical and unexcitable, possessing personalities that have been carefully edited to give the least effrontery to the widest spectrum of the populace. As they enter their thirties—and this was Ray's age when I met him—they will often settle for long periods in a favorite spot, and societies of even younger travelers will accrete around them. During these periods a sub-type may emerge—crypto-Charles Mansons who use their self-assurance to wield influence over the currencies of sex and drugs. But Ray was not of this mold. It seemed to me that his wanderings had robbed him of guile, of all predilection for power-tripping, and had left him a worldly innocent. He was of medium stature, tanned, with ragged sun-streaked hair and brown eyes set in a handsome but unremarkable face; he had the look of a castaway frat boy. Faint, fine lines radiated from the corners of his eyes, like scratches in sandstone. He usually dressed in shorts and a flour sack shirt, one of several he owned that were decorated with a line drawing of a polar bear above the name of the mill and the words HARINA BLANCA.

"That's me," he would say, pointing to the words and smiling. "White bread."

I first saw him in the town square of Meachem's Landing, sitting on a stone bench beneath the square's single tree—a blighted acacia—and tying trick knots for the amusement of a clutch of spidery black children. He grinned at me as I passed, and, surprised, being used to the hostile stares with which young Americans generally favor their elders, I grinned back and stopped to watch. I had just arrived on the island and was snarled in red tape over the leasing of land, aggravated by dealing with a lawyer who insisted on practicing his broken English when explaining things, driven to distraction by the incompetent drunks who were building my house, transforming my neat blueprints into the reality of a Cubist nightmare. I welcomed Ray's companionship as a respite. Over a span of four months we met two or three times a week for drinks at the Salon de Carmín—a ramshackle bar collapsing on its pilings above the polluted shallows of the

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harbor. To avoid the noise and frequent brawls, we would sit out back on the walkway from which the proprietress tossed her slops.

We did not dig into each other's souls, Ray and I; we told stories. Mine described the vicissitudes of Washington life, while his were exotic accounts of chicleros and cursed Mayan jade; how he had sailed to Guayaquil on a rock star's yacht or paddled alone up the Rio de la Pasión to the unexcavated ruin of Yaxchilán; a meeting with guerrillas in Salvador. Quite simply, he was the finest storyteller I have ever known. A real spellbinder. Each of his stories had obviously been worked and reworked until the emotional valence of their events had been woven into clear, colorful prose; yet they maintained a casual edge, and when listening to him it was easy to believe that they had sprung full-blown from his imagination. They were, he told me, his stock in trade. Whenever times were lean, he would find a rich American and manage to weasel a few dollars by sharing his past.

Knowing he considered me rich, I glanced at him suspiciously; but he laughed and reminded me that he had bought the last two rounds.

Though he was always the protagonist of his stories, I realized that some of them must have been second-hand, otherwise he would have been a much older, much unhealthier man; but despite this I came to understand that second-hand or not, they *were* his, that they had become part of his substance in the way a poster glued to a wall eventually merges with the surface beneath through a process of the weather. In between the stories I learned that he had grown up in Sacramento and had briefly attended Cal Tech, majoring in astronomy; but thereafter the thread of his life story unraveled into a welter of anecdote. From various sources I heard that he had rented a shanty near Punta Palmetto, sharing it with a Danish girl named Rigmor and several others, and that the police had been nosing around in response to reports of nudity and drugs; yet I never impinged on this area of his life. We were drinking companions, nothing more, and only once did I catch a glimpse of the soul buried beneath his placid exterior.

We were sitting as usual with our feet propped on the walkway railing, taking shelter in the night from the discordant reggae band inside and gazing out at the heat lightning that flashed orange above the Honduran coast. Moths batted at the necklace of light bulbs strung over the door, and the black water was lacquered with reflection. On either side, rows of yellow-lit windows marked the shanties that followed the sweep of the harbor. We had been discussing women—in particular a local woman

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whose husband appeared to be more concerned with holding onto her than curbing her infidelities.

"Being cuckolded seems the official penalty for marriage down here," I said. "It's as if they're paying the man back for being fool enough to marry them."

"Women are funny," said Ray; he laughed, realizing the inadequacy of the cliché. "They're into sacrifice," he said. "They'll break your heart and mean well by it." He made a gesture of frustration, unable to express what he intended, and stared gloomily down at his hands.

I had never before seen such an intense expression on his face; it was clear that he was not talking about women in the abstract. "Having trouble with Rigmor?" I asked.

"Rigmor?" He looked confused, then laughed again. "No, that's just fun and games." He went back to staring at his hands.

I was curious; I had a feeling that I had glimpsed beneath his surface, that the puzzle he presented—a bright young man wasting himself in endless wandering—might have a simple solution. I phrased my next words carefully, hoping to draw him out.

"I suppose most men have a woman in their past," I said, "one who failed to recognize the mutuality of a relationship."

Ray glanced at me sharply, but made no comment.

"Sometimes," I continued, "we use those women as justifications for our success or failure, and I guess they do deserve partial credit or blame. After all, they do sink their claws in us . . . but we let them."

He opened his mouth, and I believe he was about to tell me a story, the one story of real moment in his life; but just then old Spurgeon James, drunk, clad in tattered shirt and shorts, the tangle of his once-white beard stained a motley color by nicotine and rum, staggered out of the bar and began to urinate into the shallows. "Oh mon!" he said. "Dis night wild!" He reeled against the wall, half-turning, the arc of his urine glistening in the yellow light and splashing near Ray's feet. When he had finished, he tried to extort money from us by relating the story that had gained him notoriety the week before—he claimed to have seen flying saucers hanging over Flowers' Bay. Anxious to hear Ray's story, I thrust a *lempira* note at Spurgeon to get rid of him; but by the time he had gone back in, Ray had lost the impulse to talk about his past and was off instead on the subject of Spurgeon's UFOs.

"You don't believe him, do you?" I said. "Once Spurgeon gets a load on, he's liable to see the Pope driving a dune buggy."

"No," said Ray. "But I wish I could believe him. Back at Cal

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Tech I'd planned on joining one of the projects that were searching for extraterrestrial life."

"Well then," I said, fumbling out my wallet, "you'd probably be interested to know that there's been a more reliable sighting on the island. That is, if you consider a pirate reliable. Henry Meachem saw a UFO back in the 1700s—1793, I think." I pulled out a folded square of paper and handed it to Ray. "It's an excerpt from the old boy's journal. I had the clerk at the Historical Society run me off a Xerox. My youngest girl reads science fiction, and I thought she might get a laugh out of it."

Ray unfolded the paper and read the excerpt, which I reproduce below.

May 7, 1793. I had just gone below to my cabin after negotiating the reef, when I heard divers cries of astonishment and panic echoing down the companionway. I returned to the foredeck and there found most of the crew gathered along the port rail, many of them pointing to the heavens. Almost directly overhead and at an unguessable distance, I spied an object of supernal red brilliance, round, no larger than a ha'penny. The brightness of the object was most curious, and perhaps brightness is not the appropriate term to describe its effect. While it was, indeed, bright, it was not sufficiently so to cause me to shield my eyes; and yet whenever I attempted to direct my gaze upon it, I experienced a sensation of dizziness and so was forced to view it obliquely. I called for my glass, but before it could be brought there was a windy noise—yet not a whit more wind—and the object began to expand, all the while maintaining its circular form. Initially I thought it to be falling toward us, as did the crew, and several men flung themselves into the sea to escape immolation. However, I soon realized that it was merely growing larger, as though a hole were being burned through the sky to reveal the flame-lashed sky of Hell behind. Suddenly a beam of light, so distinct as to appear a reddish-gold wire strung between sky and sea, lanced down from the thing and struck the waters inside the reef. There was no splash, but a great hissing and venting of steam, and after this had subsided, the windy noise also began to subside, and the fiery circle above dwindled to a point and vanished. I considered putting forth a longboat to discover what had fallen, but I was loathe to waste the southerly wind. I marked the position of the fall—a scant three miles from our camp at Sandy Bay—and

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upon our return there will be ample opportunity to explore the phenomenon.

As I recall, Ray was impressed by the excerpt, saying that he had never read of a sighting quite like this one. Our conversation meandered over the topics of space colonies, quasars, and UFO nuts—whom he deprecated as having given extraterrestrial research a bad name—and though I tried to resurrect the topic of women, I never succeeded.

At the time I was frantically busy with supervising the building of my house, manuvering along the path of bribery and collusion that would lead to my obtaining final residence papers, and I took for granted these meetings at the Salon de Carmín. If I had been asked my opinion of Ray in those days, I would have said that he was a pleasant-enough sort but rather shallow. I never considered him my friend; in fact, I looked on our relationship as being free from the responsibilities of friendship, as a safe harbor from the storms of social convention—new friends, new neighbors, new woman—that were blowing around me. And so, when he finally left the island after four months of such conversations, I was surprised to find that I missed him.

Islands are places of mystery. Washed by the greater mysteries of wind and sea, swept over by tides of human event, they accumulate eerie magnetisms that attract the lawless, the eccentric, and—it is said—the supernatural; they shelter oddments of civilization that evolve into involute societies, and their histories are less likely to reflect orderly patterns of culture than mosaics of bizarre circumstance. Guanoja's embodiment of the mystery had fascinated me from the beginning. It had originally been home to Caribe Indians, who had moved on when Henry Meachem's crews and their slaves established their colonies—their black descendants still spoke an English dotted with eighteenth and nineteenth century colloquialisms. Rum-running, gun-smuggling, and revolution had all had their moment in the island's tradition; but the largest part of this tradition involved the spirit world. Duppies (a word used to cover a variety of unusual manifestations, but generally referring to ghosts, both human and animal); the mystical rumors associated with the smoking of black coral; and then there was the idea that some of the spirits dwelling there were not the shades of dead men and women, but ancient and magical creatures, demi-gods left over from the days of the Caribe. John

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Anderson McCrae, the patriarch of the island's storytellers, once put it to me this way:

"Dis island may look like a chewed-up bone some dog have dropped in a puddle, and de soil may be no good for plaintains, no good for corn. But when it come to de breedin of spirits, dere ain't no soil better."

It was, as John Anderson McCrae pointed out, no tropic paradise. Though the barrier reef was lovely and nourished a half-dozen diving resorts, the interior consisted of low, scrub-thatched hills and much of the coast was given over to mangrove. A dirt road ran partway around the island, connecting the shantytowns of Meachem's Landing, Spanish Harbor, and West End, and a second road crossed from Meachem's Landing to Sandy Bay on the northern coast—a curving stretch of beach that at one moment seemed beautiful, and the next abysmally ugly. That was the charm of the island, that you could be walking along a filthy beach, slapping at flies, stepping carefully to avoid dead fish and pig droppings; and then, as if a different filter had slid across the sun, you suddenly noticed the hummingbirds flitting in the sea grape, the hammocks of coco palms, the reef water glowing in bands of jade and turquoise and aquamarine. Sprinkled among the palms at Sandy Bay were a few dozen shanties set on pilings, their tin roofs scabbed by rust; jetties with gap-boarded outhouses at their seaward ends extended out over the shallows, looking like charcoal sketches by Picasso. It had no special point of attraction, but because Elizabeth's family lived nearby, I had built my house—three rooms of concrete block and a wooden porch—about a hundred yards from the terminus of the cross-island road.

A half-mile down the beach stood The Chicken Shack, and its presence had been a further inducement to build in Sandy Bay. Not that the food or decor were in the least appealing; the sole item on the menu was fried chicken, mostly bone and gristle, and the shanty was hardly larger than a chicken coop itself, containing three picnic tables and a kitchen. Mounted opposite each other on the walls were a pair of plates upon which a transient artist had painted crude likenesses of the proprietor, John James, and his wife; and these two black faces, their smiles so poorly rendered as to appear ferocious, always seemed to me to be locked in a magical duel, one whose stray energies caused the food to be overdone. If your taste was for a good meal, you would have done better elsewhere; but if you had an appetite for gossip, The Chicken Shack was unsurpassed in this regard; and it was there

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one night, after a hiatus of almost two years, that I next had word of Ray Milliken.

I had been out of circulation for a couple of weeks, repairing damage done to my house by the last norther, and since Elizabeth was grouchy with her monthlies, I decided to waste a few hours watching Hatfield Brooks tell fortunes at the Shack. He did so each Wednesday without fail. On arriving, I found him sitting at the table nearest the door—a thin young man who affected natty dreads but none of the hostility usually attendant to the hairstyle. Compared to most of the islanders, he was a saintly sort. Hard-working; charitable; a non-drinker; faithful to his wife. In front of him was what looked to be a bowling ball of marbled red plastic, but was actually a Zodiac Ball—a child's toy containing a second ball inside, and between the inner and outer shells, a film of water. There was a small window at the top, and if you shook the ball, either the word Yes or No would appear in the window, answering your question. Sitting beside Hatfield, scrunched into the corner, was his cousin Jimmy Mullins, a diminutive, wiry man of thirty-five. He had fierce black eyes that glittered under the harsh light; the skin around them was puckered as if they had been surgically removed and later re-embedded. He was shirtless, his genitals partly exposed by a hole in his shorts. John James, portly and white-haired, waved to me from behind the counter, and Hatfield asked, "How de night goin, Mr. Winship?"

"So-so," I replied, and ordered a bottle of Superior from John. "Not much business," I remarked to Hatfield, pressing the cold bottle against my forehead.

"Oh, dere's a trickle now and den," he said.

All this time Mullins had said not a word. He was apparently angry at something, glowering at Hatfield, shifting uncomfortably on the bench, the tip of his tongue darting in and out.

"Been hunting lately?" I asked him, taking a seat at the table by the counter.

I could tell he did not want to answer, to shift his focus from whatever had upset him; but he was a wheedler, a borrower, and he did not want to offend a potential source of small loans. In any case, hunting was his passion. He did his hunting by night, hypnotizing the island deer with beams from his flashlight; nonetheless he considered himself a great sportsman, and not even his bad mood could prevent him from boasting.

"Shot me a nice little buck Friday mornin," he mumbled; and

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then, becoming animated, he said, "De minute I see he eye, podner, I know he got to crumble."

There was a clatter on the stairs, and a teenage girl wearing a man's undershirt and a print skirt pushed in through the door. Junie Elkins. She had been causing the gossip mills to run overtime due to a romance she was having with a boy from Spanish Harbor, something of which her parents disapproved. She exchanged greetings, handed a coin to Hatfield, and sat across from him. Then she looked back at me, embarrassed. I pretended to be reading the label of my beer bottle.

"What you after knowin, darlin?" asked Hatfield.

Junie leaned over the table and whispered. Hatfield nodded, made a series of mystic passes, shook the ball, and Junie peered intently at the window in its top.

"Dere," said Hatfield. "Everything goin to work out in de end."

Other Americans have used Hatfield's method of fortune-telling to exemplify the islanders' gullibility and ignorance, and even Hatfield would admit to an element of hoax. He did not think he had power over the ball; he had worked off-island on the steamship lines and had gained a measure of sophistication. Still he credited the ball with having some magical potential. "De thing made to tell fortunes even if it just a toy," he said to me once. He did not deny that it gave wrong answers, but suggested these might be blamed on changing conditions and imperfect manufacture. The way he explained it was so sweetly reasonable that I almost believed him; and I did believe that if the ball were going to work anywhere, it would be on this island, a place where the rudimentary underpinnings of culture were still in evidence, where simpler laws obtained.

After Junie had gone, Mullins' hostility again dominated the room and we sat in silence. John set about cleaning the kitchen, and the clatter of dishes accentuated the tension. Suddenly Mullins brought his fist down on the table.

"Damn it, mon!" he said to Hatfield. "Gimme my money!"

"Ain't your money," said Hatfield gently.

"De mon has got to pay *me* for *my* land!"

"Ain't your land."

"I got testimony dat it's mine!" Again Mullins pounded the table.

John moved up to the counter. "Dere's goin to be no riot in dis place tonight," he said sternly.

Land disputes—as this appeared to be—were common on the island and often led to duels with conch shells or machetes. The

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pirates had not troubled with legal documents, and after taking over the island, the Hondurans had managed to swindle the best of the land from the blacks; though the old families had retained much of the acreage in the vicinity of Sandy Bay. But, since most of the blacks were at least marginally related, matters of ownership proved cloudy.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

Hatfield shrugged, and Mullins refused to answer; anger seemed visible above his head like heat ripples rising from a tin roof.

"Some damn fool have leased de Buryin Ground," said John. "Now dese two feudin."

"Who'd want that pesthole?"

"A true damn fool, dat's who," said John. "Ray Milliken."

I was startled to hear Ray's name—I had not expected to hear it again—and also by the fact that he or anyone would spend good money on the Burying Ground. It was a large acreage three miles west of Sandy Bay near Punta Palmetto, mostly mangrove swamp, and notable for its population of snakes and insects.

"It ain't de Garden of Eden, dat's true," said Hatfield. "I been over de other day watchin dem clear stumps, and every time de blade dig down it churn up three or four snakes. *Coralitos*, yellowjaws."

"Snakes don't bother dis negro," said Mullins pompously.

His referral to himself as "dis negro" was a sure sign that he was drunk, and I realized now that he had scrunched into the corner to preserve his balance. His gestures were sluggish, and his eyes were bloodshot and rolling.

"Dat's right," he went on. "Everybody know dat if de yellowjaw bite, den you just bites de pizen back in he neck."

John made a noise of disgust.

"What's Milliken want the place for?" I asked.

"He goin to start up a town," said Hatfield. "Least dat's what he hopin. De lawyer say we best hold up de paperwork 'til we find out what de government think 'bout de idea."

"De fools dat goin to live in de town already on de island," said John. "Dey stayin over in Meachem's Landin. Must be forty or fifty of dem. Dey go 'round smilin all de time, sayin, 'Ain't dis nice,' and 'Ain't dat pretty.' Dey of a cult or somethin."

"All I know," said Hatfield, "is dat de mon come to me and say, 'Hatfield, I got three thousand *lemps*, fifteen hundred dollars gold, if you give me ninety-nine years on de Buryin Ground.' And I say, 'What for you want dat piece of perdition? My cousin Arlie he

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lease you a nice section of beachfront.' And den he tell me 'bout how de Caribe live dere 'cause dat's where dey get together with de space duppies . . ."

"Aliens," said John disparagingly.

"Correct! Aliens." Hatfield stroked the Zodiac Ball. "He say de aliens talk to de Caribe 'cause de Caribe's lives is upful and just naturally 'tracts de aliens. I tell him, 'Mon, de Caribe fierce! Dey warriors!' And he say, 'Maybe so, but dey must have been doin somethin right or de aliens won't be comin 'round.' And den he tell me dat dey plan to live like de Caribe and bring de aliens back to Guanoja."

"Gimme a Superior, John," said Mullins bossily.

"You got de money?" asked John, his arms folded, knowing the answer.

"No, I ain't got de money!" shouted Mullins. "Dis boog clot got my money!" He threw himself at Hatfield and tried to wrestle him to the floor; but Hatfield, being younger, stronger, and sober, caught his wrists and shoved him back into the corner. Mullins' head struck the wall with a *thwack*, and he grabbed the injured area with both hands.

"Look," I said. "Even if the government permits the town, which isn't likely, do you really believe a town can survive on the Burying Ground? Hell, they'll be straggling back to Meachem's Landing before the end of the first night."

"Dat's de gospel," said John, who had come out from back of the counter to prevent further riot.

"Has any money changed hands?" I asked.

"He give me two hundred *lemps* as security," said Hatfield. "But I 'spect he want dat back if de government disallow de town."

"Well," I said, "if there's no town, there's no argument. Why not ask the ball if there's going to be a town on the Burying Ground?"

"Sound reasonable to me," said John; he gave the ball no credence, but was willing to suspend disbelief in order to make peace.

"Lemme do it!" Mullins snatched the ball up, staring cross-eyed into the red plastic. "Is dere goin to be a town on de Buryin Ground?" he asked solemnly; then he turned it over twice and set it down. I stood and leaned forward to see the little window.

No, it read.

"Let's have beers all around," I said to John. "And a soda for Hatfield. We'll toast the solution of a problem."

But the problem was not solved—it was only in the first stages

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of inception—and though the Zodiac Ball's answer eventually proved accurate, we had not asked it the right question.

This was in October, a time for every sort of inclement weather, and it rained steadily over the next few days. Fog banks moved in, transforming the sea into a mystic gray dimension, muffling the crash of waves on the reef so they sounded like bones being crunched in an enormous mouth. Not good weather for visiting the Burying Ground. But finally a sunny day dawned, and I set out to find Ray Milliken. I must admit I had been hurt by his lack of interest in renewing our acquaintance, but I had too many questions to let this stop me from hunting him up. Something about a colony built to attract aliens struck me as sinister rather than foolhardy—this being how it struck most people. I could not conceive of a person like Ray falling prey to such a crackpot notion; nor could I support the idea, one broached by Elizabeth, that he was involved in a swindle. She had heard that he had sold memberships in the colony and raised upwards of a hundred thousand dollars. The report was correct, but I doubt that Ray's original motives have much importance.

There was no road inland, only a snake-infested track, and so I borrowed a neighbor's dory and rowed along inside the reef. The tide was low, and iron-black coral-heads lifted from the sea like the crennelated parapets of a drowned castle; beyond, the water was banded with sun-spattered streaks of slate and lavender. I could not help being nervous. People steered clear of the Burying Ground—it was rumored to harbor duppies . . . but then so was every other part of the island, and I suspect the actual reason for its desertion was that it had no worth to anyone, except perhaps to a herpetologist. The name of the place had come down from the Caribe; this was a puzzling fact, since all their gravesites were located high in the hills. Pottery and tools had been found in the area, but no solid evidence of burials. Two graves did exist, those belonging to Ezekiel Brooks, the son of William, a mate on Henry Meachem's privateer, and to Ezekiel's son Carl. They had lived most of their lives on the land as hermits, and it was their solitary endurance that had ratified the Brooks family's claim to ownership.

On arriving, I tied the dory to a mangrove root and immediately became lost in a stand of scrub palmetto. I had sweated off my repellent, and mosquitoes swarmed over me; I stepped cautiously, probing the weeds with my machete to stir up any lurking snakes. After a short walk I came to a clearing about fifty yards square;

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it had been scraped down to the raw dirt. On the far side stood a bulldozer, and next to it was a thatched shelter beneath which a group of men were sitting. The primary colors and simple shapes—yellow bulldozer, red dirt, dark green walls of brush—made the clearing look like a test for motor skills that might be given to a gigantic child. As I crossed to the shelter, one of the men jumped up and walked toward me. It was Ray. He was shirtless, wearing boots and faded jeans, and a rosy sheen of new sunburn overlaid his tan.

"Frank," he said, pumping my hand.

I was taken aback by the religious affirmation in his voice—it was as if my name were something he had long treasured.

"I was planning to drop around in a few days," he said. "After we got set up. How are you?"

"Old and tormented," I said, slapping at a mosquito.

"Here." He gestured at the shelter. "Let's get into the shade."

"How are *you*?" I asked as we walked.

"Great, Frank," he replied. "Really great." His smile seemed the product of an absolute knowledge that things, indeed, were really great.

He introduced me to the others; I cannot recall their names, a typical sampling of Jims and Daves and Toms. They all had Ray's Krishna-conscious smile, his ultra-sincerity, and they delighted in sharing with me their lunch of banana fritters and coconut. "Isn't this food beautiful?" said one. There was so much beatitude around me that I, grumpy from the heat and mosquitoes, felt like a heathen among them. Ray kept staring at me, smiling, and this was the main cause of my discomfort. I had the impression that something was shining too brightly behind his eyes, a kind of manic brilliance flaring in him the way an old light bulb flares just before it goes dark for good. He began to tell me of the improvements they were planning—wells, electronic mosquito traps, generators, schools with computers, a medical clinic for the islanders, on and on. His friends chimed in with additions to the list, and I had a feeling that I was listening to a well-rehearsed litany.

"I thought you were going to live off the land like the Caribe," I said.

"Oh no," said Ray. "There are some things they did that we're going to do, but we'll do them better."

"Suppose the government denies your permits?"

I was targeted by a congregation of imperturbable smiles. "They

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came through two days ago," said Ray. "We're going to call the colony Port Ezekiel."

After lunch, Ray led me through the brush to a smaller clearing where half-a-dozen shelters were erected; hammocks were strung beneath each one. His had a fringe of snakeskins tacked to the roofpoles, at least thirty of them; they were crusted with flies, shifting horribly in the breeze. They were mostly yellowjaws—the local name for the fer-de-lance—and he said they killed ten or twelve a day. He sat cross-legged on the ground and invited me to take the hammock.

"Want to hear what I've been up to?" he asked.

"I've heard some of it."

"I bet you have." He laughed. "They think we're looney." He started as the bulldozer roared to life in the clearing behind us. "Do you remember showing me old Meachem's journal?"

"Yes."

"In a way you're responsible for all this." He waved at the dirt and the shelters. "That was my first real clue." He clasped his hands between his legs. "When I left here, I went back to the States. To school. I guess I was tired of traveling, or maybe I realized what a waste of space I'd been. I took up astronomy again. I wasn't very interested in it, but I wasn't more interested in anything else. Then one day I was going over a star chart, and I noticed something amazing. You see, while I was here I'd gotten into the Caribe culture. I used to wander around the Burying Ground looking for pottery. Found some pretty good pieces. And I'd hike up into the hills and make maps of the villages, where they'd stationed their look-outs and set their signal fires. I still had those maps, and what I'd noticed was that the pattern of the Caribe signal fires corresponded exactly to the constellation Cassiopeia. It was incredible! The size of the fires even corresponded to the magnitudes of the specific stars. I dropped out of school and headed back to the island." He gave me an apologetic look. "I tried to see you, but you were on the mainland."

"That must have been when Elizabeth's old boy friend was giving us some trouble," I said. "We had to lie low for a while."

"I guess so." Ray reached for a pack that was propped against the wall and extracted a sheaf of 8" by 11" photographs; they appeared to consist chiefly of smudges and crooked lines. "I began digging through the old sites, especially here—this is the only place I found pottery with these particular designs . . ."

From this point on I had difficulty keeping a straight face. Have

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you ever had a friend tell you something unbelievable, something they believed in so strongly that for you to discredit it would cause them pain? Perhaps it was a story about a transcendent drug experience or their conversion to Christianity. And did they stare at you earnestly as they spoke, watching your reactions? I mumbled affirmatively and nodded and avoided Ray's eyes. Compared to Ray's thesis, Eric Von Daniken's ravings were a model of academic discipline. From the coincidental pattern of the signal fires, the incident of Meachem's UFO and some drunken tales he had solicited, from these smudges and lines which—if you exerted your imagination—bore a vague resemblance to bipeds wearing fishbowls on their heads, Ray had concocted an intricate scenario of alien visitation. It was essentially the same story as Von Daniken's—the ancient, star-seeding race. But where Ray's account differed was in his insistence that the aliens had had a special relationship with the Caribe, that the Caribe could call them down by lighting their fires. The landing Meachem had witnessed had been one of the last, because with the arrival of the English the Caribe had gradually retreated from the island, and the aliens no longer had a reason for visiting. Ray meant to lure them back by means of a laser display that would cast a brighter image of Cassiopeia than the Caribe could have managed; and when the aliens returned, he would entreat them to save our foundering civilization.

He had sold the idea of the colony by organizing a society to study the possibility of extraterrestrial life; he had presented slides and lectured on the Guanojan Outer Space Connection. I did not doubt his ability to make such a presentation, but I was amazed that educated people had swallowed it. He told me that his group included a doctor, an engineer, and sundry Ph.D.s, and that they all had some college background. And yet perhaps it was not so amazing. Even today there must be in America, as there were when I left it, a great many aimless and exhausted people like Ray and his friends, people damaged by some powerful trouble in their past and searching for an acceptable madness.

When Ray had finished, he looked at me soberly and said, "You think we're nuts, don't you?"

"No," I said; but I did not meet his eyes.

"We're not," he said.

"It's not important." I tried to pass it off as a joke. "Not down here, anyway."

"It's not just the evidence that convinced me," he said. "I knew it the first time I came to the Burying Ground. I could feel it."

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"Do you remember what else we talked about the night I showed you Meachem's journal?" I am not sure why I wanted to challenge him; perhaps it was simply curiosity, a desire to know how fragile his calm mask really was.

"No," he said, and smiled. "We talked about a lot of things."

"We were talking about women, and then Spurgeon James interrupted us. But I think you were on the verge of telling me about a woman who had hurt you. Badly. Is all that behind you now?"

His smile dissolved, and the expression that flared briefly in its place was terrible to see—grieving, and baffled by the grief. This time it was *his* eyes that drifted away from mine. "You're wrong about me, Frank," he said. "Port Ezekiel is going to be something very special."

Shortly thereafter I made my excuses, and he walked me down to the dory. I invited him to visit me and have a meal, but I knew he would not come. I had threatened his beliefs, the beliefs he thought would shore him up, save him, and there was now a tangible barrier between us.

"Come back anytime," he called as I rowed away.

He stood watching me, not moving at all, an insignificant figure being merged by distance into the dark green gnarl of the mangrove; even when I could barely see him, he continued to stand there, as ritually attendant as his mythical Caribe hosts might have been while watching the departure of their alien guests.

Over five weeks passed before I again gave much thought to Ray and Port Ezekiel. (Port Ezekiel! That name as much as anything had persuaded me of Ray's insanity, smacking as it did of Biblical smugness, a common shelter for the deluded.) This was a studied lack of concern on my part. I felt he was lost and wanted no involvement with his tragedy. And besides, though the colony remained newsworthy, other events came to supersede it. The shrimp fleet struck against its parent American company, and riots broke out in the streets of Spanish Harbor. The old talk of independence was revived in the bars—idle talk, but it stirred the coals of anti-Americanism. Normally smiling faces frowned at me, the prices went up when I shopped in town, and once a child yelled at me, "Get off de island!" Small things, but they shook me. And since the establishment of Port Ezekiel had been prelude to these events, I could not help feeling that Ray was somehow to blame for this peculiarly American darkness now shadowing my home.

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Despite my attempt to ignore Ray's presence, I did have news of him. I heard that he had paid Hatfield in full and that Jimmy Mullins was on the warpath. Three thousand *lempira* must have seemed a king's ransom to him; he lived in a tiny shanty with his wife Hettie and two underfed children, and he had not worked for over a year. I also heard that the shipments of modern conveniences intended for Port Ezekiel had been waylaid by customs—someone overlooked in the chain of bribery, no doubt—and that the colonists had moved into the Burying Ground and were living in brushwood shacks. And then, over a span of a couple of weeks, I learned that they were deserting the colony. Groups of them turned up daily in Meachem's Landing, complaining that Ray had misled them. Two came to our door one evening, a young man and woman, both delirious, sick with dysentery and covered with infected mosquito bites. They were too wasted to tell us much, but after we had bedded them down I asked the woman what was happening at the colony.

"It was awful," she said, twisting her hand in the blanket and shivering. "Bugs and snakes . . . and . . ." Her eyes squeezed shut. "He just sits there with the snakes."

"You mean Ray?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice cracking into hysteria. "I don't know."

Then, one night as Elizabeth and I were sitting on the porch, I saw a flashlight beam weaving toward us along the beach. By the way the light wavered, swooping up to illuminate the palm crowns, down to shine upon a stoved-in dory, I could tell the bearer was very drunk. Elizabeth leaned forward, peering into the dark. "Oh Lord," she said, holding her bathrobe closed. "It dat damn Jimmy Mullins." She rose and went into the house, pausing at the door to add, "If he after foolin with me, you tell him I'm goin to speak with my uncle 'bout him."

Mullins stopped at the margin of the porch light to urinate, then he staggered up onto the steps; he dropped his flashlight, and it rolled over beside my machete, which was propped by the door. He was wearing his town clothes—a white rayon shirt with the silk-screened photo of a soccer star on the back, and brown slacks spattered with urine. Threads of saliva hung from his chin.

"Mr. Frank, sir," he said with great effort. His eyes rolled up, and for a moment I thought he was going to pass out; but he pulled himself together, shook his head to clear the fog, and said, "De mon have got to pay me."

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I wanted no part of his feud with Hatfield. "Why don't I give you a ride home?" I said. "Hettie'll be worried."

Blearily, he focused on me, clinging to a support post. "Dat boog Yankee clot have cheated me," he said. "You talk to him, Mr. Frank. You tell him he got to pay."

"Ray Milliken? He doesn't owe you anything."

"Somebody owe me!" Mullins flailed his arm at the night. "And I ain't got de force to war with Hatfield." He adopted a clownish expression of sadness. "I born in de summer and never get no bigger den what you seein now."

So, sucked along by the feeble tide of anti-Americanism, Mullins had given up on Hatfield and shifted his aim to a more vulnerable target. I told him that Ray was crazy and would likely not respond to either threats or logic; but Mullins insisted that Ray should have checked Hatfield's claim before paying him. Finally I agreed to speak to Ray on his behalf and—somewhat mollified—he grew silent. He clung to the post, pouting; I settled back in my chair. It was a beautiful night, the phosphorescent manes of the breakers tossing high above the reef, and I wished he would leave us alone to the view.

"Damn boog Yankee!" He reeled away from the post and careened against the doorframe; his hand fell upon my machete. Before I could react, he picked it up and slashed at the air. "I cut dat bastard down to de deck!" he shouted, glaring at me.

The moment seemed endless, as if the flow of time had snagged on the point of the machete. Drunk, he might do anything. I felt weak and helpless, my stomach knotted by a chill. The blade looked to have the same drunken glitter as his eyes. God knows what might have happened, but at that moment Elizabeth—her robe belling open, eyes gleaming crazily—sneaked up behind him and smacked him on the neck with an ax handle. Her first blow sent him tottering forward, the machete still raised in a parody of attack; and the second drove him off the porch to sprawl face down in the sand.

Later, after John James and Hettie had dragged Mullins home, as Elizabeth and I lay in bed, I confessed that I had been too afraid to move during the confrontation. "Don't vex yourself, Frank," she said. "Dere's enough trouble on de island dat sooner or later you be takin care of some of mine." And after we had made love, she curled against me, tucked under my arm, and told me of a dream that had frightened her the previous night. I knew what she was doing—nothing about her was mysterious—and yet, as with every woman I have known, I could not escape the feeling

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that a stranger lay beside me, someone whose soul had been molded by a stronger gravity and under a hotter star.

I spent the next morning patching things up with Mullins, making him a gift of vegetable seeds and listening to his complaints, and I did not leave for the Burying Ground until mid-afternoon. It had rained earlier, and gray clouds were still passing overhead, hazy fans of sunlight breaking through now and again. The chop of the water pulled against me, and it was getting on toward sunset by the time I arrived—out on the horizon the sea and sky were blending in lines of blackish squalls. I hurried through the brush, intending to convey my warning as quickly as possible and be home before the winds; but when I reached the first clearing, I stopped short.

The thatch and poles of the brushwood huts were strewn over the dirt, torn apart, mixed in with charred tin cans, food wrappers, the craters of old cooking fires, broken tools, mildewed paperbacks, and dozens of conch shells, each with their whorled tops sliced off—that must have been a staple of their diet. I called Ray's name, and the only answer was an intensification in the buzzing of the flies. It was like the aftermath of a measly war, stinking and silent. I picked my way across the litter to the second clearing and again was brought up short. An identical mess carpeted the dirt and Ray's shelter remained intact, the fringe of rotting snakeskins still hanging from the roofpoles—but that was not what had drawn my attention.

A trench had been dug in front of the shelter and covered with a sheet of wire mesh; large rocks held the wire in place. Within the trench were forty or fifty snakes. *Coralitos*, yellowjaws, Tom Goffs, cottonmouths. Their slithering, their noses scraping against the wire as they tried to escape, created a sibilance that tuned my nerves a notch higher. As I stepped over the trench and into the shelter, several of them struck at me; patches of the mesh glistened with their venom. Ray's hammock was balled-up in a corner, and the ground over which it had swung had been excavated; the hole was nearly full of murky water—ground water by the briny smell. I poked a stick into it and encountered something hard at a depth of about three feet. A boulder, probably. Aside from Ray's pack, the only other sign of habitation was a circular area of dirt that had been patted smooth; dozens of bits of oyster shell were scattered across it, all worked into geometric shapes—stars, hexagons, squares, and so forth. A primitive gameboard. I did not know what exactly to make of these things, but

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I knew they were the trappings of madness. There was an air of savagery about them, of a mind as tattered as its surroundings, shriveled to the simplest of considerations; and I did not believe that the man who lived here would understand any warning I might convey. Suddenly afraid, I turned to leave and was given such a shock that I nearly fell back into the water-filled pit.

Ray was standing an arm's-length away, watching me. His hair was ragged, shoulder-length, and bound by a cottonmouth-skin band; his shorts were holed and filth-encrusted. The dirt smeared on his cheeks and forehead made his eyes appear round and staring. Mosquito bites speckled his chest—though not as many as had afflicted the colonists I had treated. In his right hand he carried a long stick with a twine noose at one end, and in his left hand was a burlap sack whose bottom humped and writhed.

"Ray," I said, sidling away from him.

I expected a croak or a scream of rage for an answer, but when he spoke it was in his usual voice. "I'm glad you're here," he said. He dropped the sack—it was tied at the top—beside the trench and leaned his stick against the wall of the shelter.

Still afraid, but encouraged by the normalcy of his actions, I said, "What's going on here?"

He gave me an appraising stare. "You better see her for yourself, Frank. You wouldn't believe me if I told you." He sat cross-legged beside the patch of smoothed dirt and began picking up the shell-bits. The way he picked them up fascinated me—so rapidly, pinching them up between thumb and forefinger, and funneling them back into his palm with the other three fingers, displaying an expert facility. And, I noticed, he was only picking up the hexagons.

"Sit down," he said. "We've got an hour or so to kill."

I squatted on the opposite side of the gameboard. "You can't stay here, Ray."

He finished with the hexagons, set them aside, and started on the squares. "Why not?"

I told him about Mullins, but as I had presumed he was unconcerned. All his money, he said, was tied up in investment funds; he would find a way to deal with Mullins. He was calm in the face of my arguments, and though this calm seemed to reflect a more deep-seated confidence than had been evident on my first visit, I did not trust it. To my mind the barrier between us had hardened, become as tricky to navigate as the reef around the island. I gave up arguing and sat quietly, watching him play with the shells. Night was falling, banks of dark clouds were rushing

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overhead, and gusts of wind shredded the thatch. Heavy seas would soon be washing over the reef, and it would be beyond my strength to row against them. But I did not want to abandon him. Under the dreary storm-light, the wreckage of Port Ezekiel looked leached of color and vitality, and I had an image of the two of us being survivors of a great disaster, stalemated in debate over the worth of restarting civilization.

"It's almost time," he said, breaking the silence. He gazed out to the swaying tops of the bushes that bounded the clearing. "This is so wild, Frank. Sometimes I can't believe it myself."

The soft astonishment in his voice brought the pathos of his situation home to me. "Jesus, Ray," I said. "Come back with me. There's nothing here."

"Tell me that when you've seen her." He stood and walked over to the water-filled pit. "You were right, Frank. I was crazy, and maybe I still am. But I was right, too. Just not in the way I expected."

"Right about what?"

He smiled. "Cassiopeia." He hunkered down by the pit. "I've got to get in the water. There has to be physical contact or else the exchange can't occur. I'll be unconscious for a while, but don't worry about it. All right?"

Without waiting for my approval, he lowered himself into the water. He seemed to be groping for something, and he shifted about until he had found a suitable position. His shoulders just cleared the surface. Then he bowed his head so that I could no longer see his face.

My thoughts were in turmoil. His references to "her," his self-baptism, and now the sight of his disembodied head and tendrils of hair floating on the water, all this had rekindled my fear. I decided that the best thing I could do for him, for both of us, would be to knock him out, to haul him back to Sandy Bay for treatment. But as I looked around for a club, I noticed something that rooted me in my tracks. The snakes had grown frantic in their efforts to escape; they were massed at the far side of the trench, pushing at the mesh with such desperation that the rocks holding it down were wobbling. And then, an instant later, I began to sense another presence in the clearing.

How did I sense this? It was similar to the feeling you have when you are alone for the first time with a woman to whom you are attracted, how it seems you could close your eyes and stopper your ears and still be aware of her every shift in position, registering these changes as thrills running along your nerves and

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muscles. And I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this presence was female. I whirled around, certain that someone was behind me. Nothing. I turned back to Ray. Tremors were passing through his shoulders, and his breath came in hoarse shudders as if he had been removed from his natural element and were having trouble with the air. Scenes of old horror movies flashed through my brain. The stranger lured to an open grave by an odd noise; the ghoul rising from the swamp, black water dripping from his talons; the maniac with the split-personality, smiling, hiding a bloody knife under his coat. And then I saw, or imagined I saw, movement on the surface of the water; it was bulging—not bubbling, but the entire surface bulging upward as if some force below were building to an explosion. Terrified, I took a backward step and, as my foot nudged the wire screen over the trench, as the snakes struck madly at the mesh, terrified themselves, I broke and ran.

I went crashing through the brush, certain that Ray was after me, possessed by some demon dredged up from his psyche . . . or by worse. I did not stop to untie the dory, but grabbed the machete from beneath the seat, hacked the rope in two, and pulled hard out into the water. Waves slopped over the bow, the dory bucked and plunged, and the noise from the reef was deafening. But even had a hurricane been raging, I would not have put back into the Burying Ground. I strained at the oars, gulping down breaths that were half salt spray, and I did not feel secure until I had passed beyond Punta Palmetto and was hidden from the view of whatever was now wandering that malarial shore.

After a night's sleep, after dosing my fears with the comforts of home, all my rational structures were re-erected. I was ashamed at having run, at having left Ray to endure his solitary hell, and I assigned everything I had seen and felt to a case of nerves or—and I did not think this impossible—to poltergeist-like powers brought on by his madness. Something had to be done for him. As soon as I had finished breakfast, I drove over to Meachem's Landing and asked the militia for their help. I explained the situation to one Sergeant Colmenares, who thanked me for my good citizenship but said he could do nothing unless the poor man had committed a crime. If I had been clear-headed, I would have invented a crime, anything to return Ray to civilization; instead, I railed at the sergeant, stumped out of the office, and drove back to Sandy Bay.

Elizabeth had asked me to buy some cooking oil, and so I stopped

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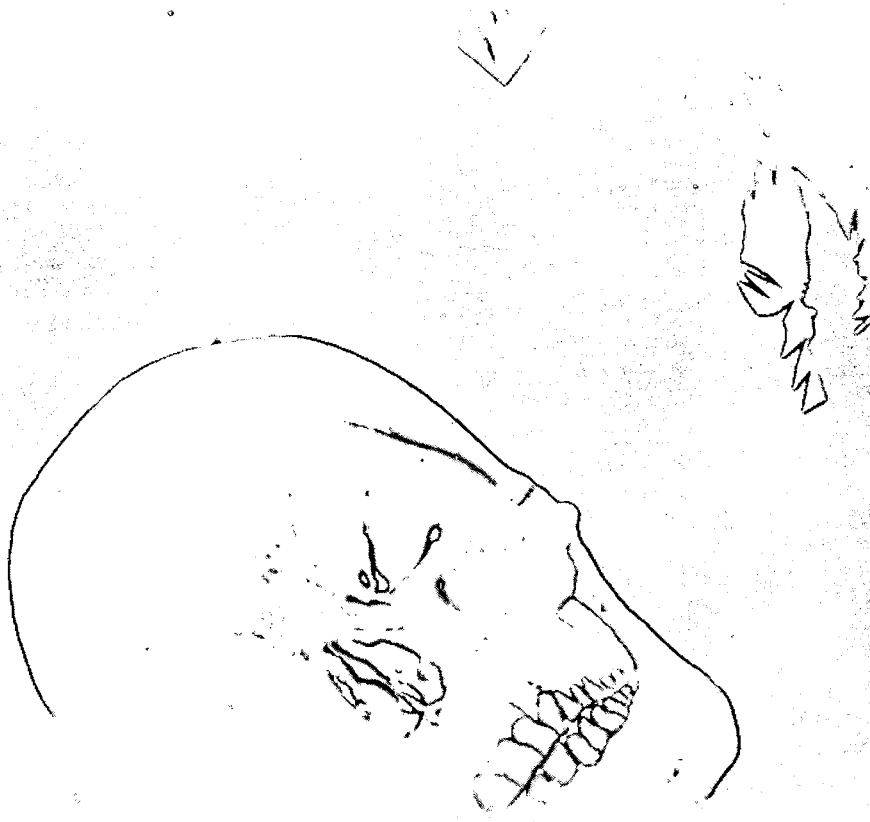

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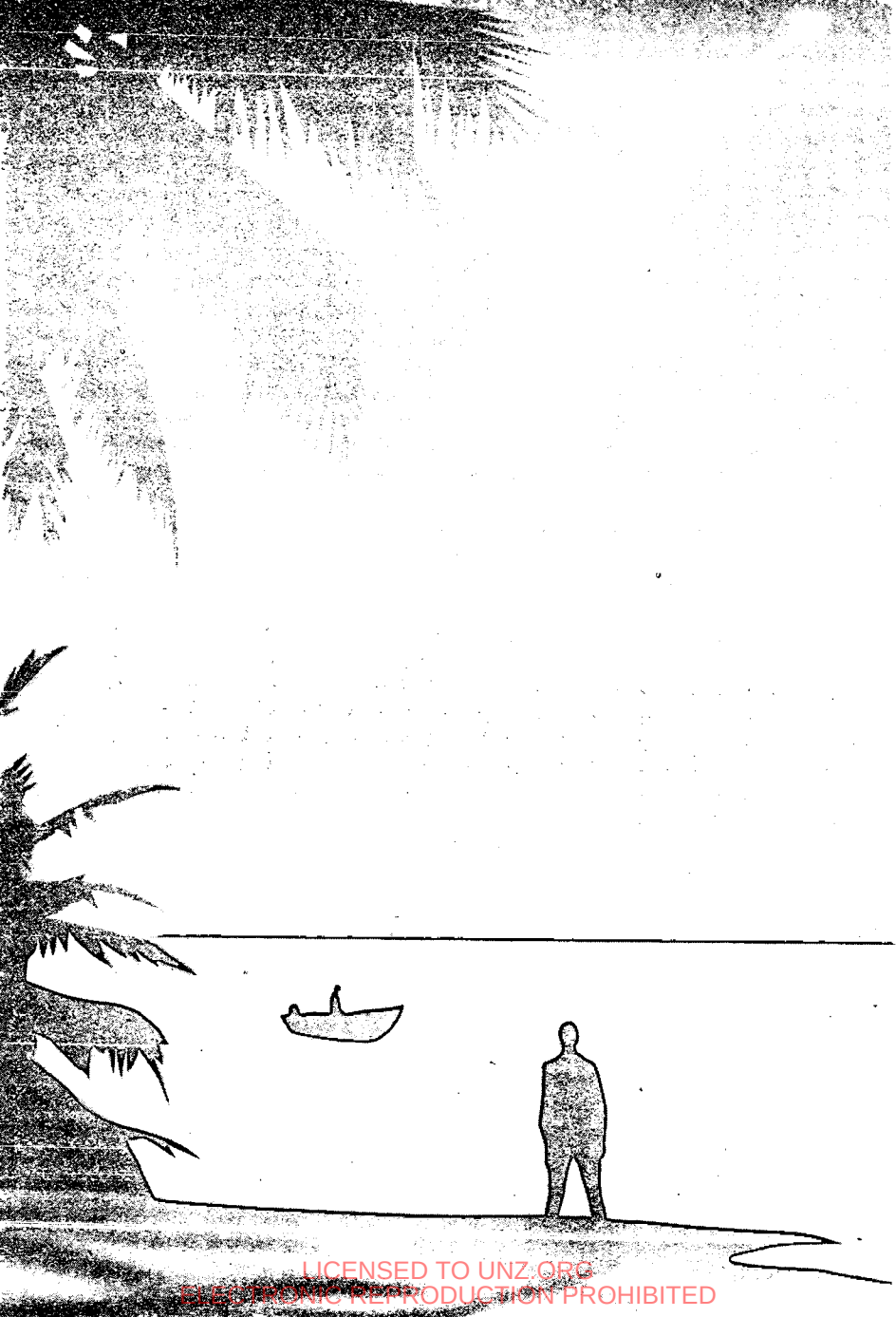

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off at Sarah's Store, a green-painted shanty the size of a horse stall not far from The Chicken Shack. Inside, there was room for three people to stand at the counter, and behind it Sarah was enthroned on her stool. An old woman, almost ninety, with a frizzy crown of white hair and coal-black skin that took on bluish highlights under the sun. It was impossible to do business with her and not hear the latest gossip, and during our conversation she mentioned that Ray had stopped in the night before.

"He after havin a strife wit dat Jimmy Mullins," she said. "Now Jimmy he have followed dis tourist fella down from de Seabreeze where dey been drinkin, and he settin up to beg de mon fah somet'ing. You know how he gets wit his lies." She did her Jimmy Mullins imitation, puffing out her chest and frowning. " 'I been in Viet Nam,' he say, and show de mon dat scar from when he shot himself in de leg. 'I bleed fah Oncle Sam, and now Oncle Sam goin to take care of dis negro.' Den in walk Ray Milliken. He did not look left or right but jus' stare at de cans of fruit juice and ax how much dey was. Talkin wit dat duppy voice. Lord! De duppy force crawlin all over him. Now dis tourist fella have gone 'cause de sight of Ray wit his wild look and his scrapes have made de fella leery. But Jimmy jus' stand dere, watchful. And when Ray pay fah de juice, Jimmy say, 'Gimme dat money.' Ray make no reply. He drink de juice down and den he amble out de door. Jimmy follow him and he screamin. 'You scorn me like dat!' he say. 'You scorn me like dat!' It take no wisdom to know dere's blood in de air, so I set a Superior on de counter and call out, 'Jimmy, you come here 'fore yo' beer lose de chill.' And dat lure him back."

I asked Sarah what she meant by "duppy voice," but she would only say, "Dat's what it were—de duppy voice." I paid for my oil, and as I went out the door, she called, "God bless America!" She always said it as a farewell to her American customers; most thought she was putting them on, but knowing Sarah's compassion for waifs and strays, her conviction that material wealth was the greatest curse one could have, I believe it was heartfelt.

Sarah's story had convinced me of the need for action, and that afternoon I returned to the Burying Ground. I did not confront Ray; I stationed myself behind some bushes twenty feet to the right of the shelter. I planned to do as I should have done before—hit him and drag him back to Sandy Bay. I had with me Elizabeth's ax handle and an ample supply of bug repellent.

Ray was not at the clearing when I arrived, and he did not put

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in an appearance until after five o'clock. This time he was carrying a guitar, probably gleaned from the debris. He sat beside the trench and began chording, singing in a sour, puny voice that sent a chill through me despite the heat; it seemed he was giving tongue to the stink of the rotting snakeskins, amplifying the whine of the insects. The sun reflected an orange fire on the panels of the guitar.

"Cas-si-o-pee-ee-ya," he sang, country-western style, "I'll be yours tonight." He laughed—cracked, high-pitched laughter—and rocked back and forth on his haunches. "Cas-si-o-pee-ee-ya, why don't you treat me right?"

Either he was bored or else that was the whole of the song. He set down the guitar and for the next hour he hardly moved, scratching, looking up to the sun as if checking its decline. Sunset faded, and the evening star climbed above Alps of purple cumulus. Finally, stretching and shaking out the kinks, he stood and walked to the pit and lowered himself into the water. It was at this point that I had intended to hit him, but my curiosity got the best of me and I decided to observe him instead; I told myself that I would be better able to debunk his fantasies if I had some personal experience of them. I would hit him after he had fallen asleep.

It was over an hour before he emerged from the water, and when he did I was very glad to be hidden. Icy stars outlined the massed clouds, and the moon had risen three-quarters full, transforming the clearing into a landscape of black and silvery-gray. Everything had a shadow, even the tattered fronds lying on the ground. There was just enough wind to make the shadows tremble, and the only noise apart from the wind was the pattering of lizards across the dessicated leaves. From my vantage I could not see if the water was bulging upward, but soon the snakes began their hissing, their pushing at the mesh, and I felt again that female presence.

Then Ray leaped from the pit.

It was the most fluid entrance I have ever seen—like a dancer mounting onto stage from a sunken level. He came straight up in a shower of silver droplets and landed with his legs straddling the pit, snapping his head from side-to-side. He stepped out of the shelter, pacing back and forth along the trench, and as the light struck him full, I stopped thinking of him as *he*.

Even now, at a remove from the events, I have difficulty thinking of Ray as a man; the impression of femininity was so powerful that it obliterated all my previous impressions of him. Though

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not in the least dainty or swishy, every one of his movements had a casual female sensuality, and his walk was potently feminine in the way of a lioness. His face was leaner, sleeker of line. Aside from these changes was the force of that presence pouring over me. I had the feeling that I was involved in a scene out of prehistory—the hominid warrior with his club spying on an unknown female, scenting her, knowing her sex along the circuits of his nerves. When he . . . when she had done pacing, she squatted beside the trench, removed one of the rocks, and lifted the edge of the screen. With incredible speed, she reached in and snatched out a wriggling yellowjaw. I heard a sickening, mushy crack as she crushed its head between her thumb and forefinger. She skinned it with her teeth, worrying a rip, tearing loose long peels until the blood-rilled meat gleamed in the moonlight. All this in a matter of seconds. Watching her eat, I found I was gripping the ax handle so tightly that my hand ached. She tossed the remains of the snake into the bushes, then she stood—again, that marvelous fluidity—and turned toward the spot where I was hiding.

"Frank," she said; she barely pronounced the A and trilled the R, so that the word came out as "Frrenn-kuh."

It was like hearing one's name spoken by an idol. The ax handle slipped from my hand. I stood, weak-kneed. If her speed afoot was equal to her speed of hand, I had no chance of escape.

"I won't kill you," she said, her accent slurring the words into the rhythm of a musical phrase. She went back under the shelter and sat beside the patch of smoothed dirt.

The phrasing of her assurance did nothing to ease my fears, yet I came forward. I told myself that this was Ray, that he had created this demoness from his sick needs and imaginings; but I could not believe it. With each step I became more immersed in her, as if her soul were too large for the body and I was passing through its outer fringes. She motioned me to sit, and as I did, her strangeness lapped over me like heat from an open fire.

My throat was constricted, but I managed to say, "Cassiopeia?"

Her lips thinned and drew back from her teeth in a feral smile. "That's what Ray calls me. He can't pronounce my name. My home . . ." She glanced at the sky. "The clouds obscure it."

I gawped at her; I had so many questions, I could not frame even one. Finally I said, "Meachem's UFO. Was that your ship?"

"The ship was destroyed far from here. What Meachem saw was a ghost, or rather the opening and closing of a road traveled by one." She gestured at the pit. "It lies there, beneath the water."

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I remembered the hard something I had poked with a stick; it had not felt in the least ectoplasmic, and I pointed this out.

" 'Ghost' is a translation of the word for it in my language," she said. "You touched the energy fields of a . . . a machine. It was equipped with a homing capacity, but its fields were disrupted by the accident that befell my ship. It can no longer open the roads between the worlds."

"Roads?" I said.

"I don't understand the roads, and if I could explain them it would translate as metaphysics. The islanders would probably accept the explanation, but I doubt you would." She traced a line in the dirt with her forefinger. "To enter the superluminal universe the body must die and be reanimated at journey's end. The other components of the life travel within the machine. All I know of the roads is that though journeys often last for years, they appear to be direct. When Meachem saw flame in the sky, it was because I came from flame, from the destruction of my ship."

"The machine . . ." I began.

"It's an engineered life form," she said. "You see, any life consists of a system of energy fields unified in the flesh. The machine is a partial simulation of that system, a kind of phantom life that's designed to sustain the most crucial of those fields—what you'd call the *anima*, the soul—until the body can be reanimated . . . or, if the body has been destroyed, until an artificial host has been supplied. Of course there was no such host here. So the machine attracted those whose souls were impaired, those with whom a temporary exchange could be made. Without embodiment I would have gone mad." She scooped up a handful of shell-bits. "I suppose I've gone mad in spite of it. I've rubbed souls with too many madmen."

She tossed out the shell-bits. A haphazard toss, I thought; but then I noticed that they had fallen into neat rows.

"The differences between us are too great for the exchange to be other than temporary," she went on. "If I didn't re-enter the machine each morning, both I and my host—and the machine—would die."

Despite the evidence of my senses, this talk of souls and energy fields—reminding me of the occult claptrap of the Sixties—had renewed my doubts. "People have been digging up the Burying Ground for years," I said. "Why hasn't someone found this machine?"

"It's a very clever machine," she said, smiling again. "It hides from those who aren't meant to find it."

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"Why would it choose only impaired hosts?"

"To choose an unimpaired one would run contrary to the machine's morality. And to mine."

"How does it attract them?"

"My understanding of the machine is limited, but I assume there's a process of conditioning involved. Each time I wake in a new host, it's always the same. A clearing, a shelter, the snakes."

I started to ask another question, but she waved me off.

"You act as though I must prove something," she said. "I have no wish to prove anything. Even if I did, I'm not sure I could. Most of my memories were stripped from me at the death of my body, and those that remain are those that have stained the soul. In a sense I'm as much Ray as I am myself. Each night I inherit his memories, his abilities. It's like living in a closet filled with someone else's belongings."

I continued to ask questions, with part of my mind playing the psychiatrist, eliciting answers in order to catalog Ray's insanity; yet my doubts were fading. She could not recall the purpose of her journey or even of her life, but she said that her original body had been similar to the human form—her people, too, had a myth of an ancient, star-seeding race—though it had been larger, stronger, with superior organs of perception. Her world was a place of thick jungles, and her remote ancestors had been nocturnal predators. An old Caribe man had been her first host on the island; he had wandered onto the Burying Ground six months after her arrival, maddened by pain from a cancer that riddled his stomach. His wife had been convinced that a goddess had possessed him, and she had brought the tribal elders to bear witness.

"They were afraid of me," she said. "And I was equally afraid of them. Little devil-men with ruddy skins and necklaces of jaguar teeth. They built fires around me, hemming me in, and they'd dance and screech and thrust their spears at me through the flames. It was nightmarish. I knew they might lose control of their fear at any second and try to kill me. I might have defended myself, but life was sacred to me then. They were whole, vital beings. To harm them would have been to mock what remained of me."

She had cultivated them, and they had responded by providing her with new hosts, by arranging their fires to depict the constellation Cassiopeia, hoping to call down other gods to keep her company. It had been a fruitless hope, and there were other sig-

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nals that would have been more recognizable to her people, but she had been touched by their concern and had not told them.

I will not pretend that I recall exactly everything she said, yet I believe what follows captures the gist of her tale. At first I was disconcerted by its fluency and humanity; but I soon realized that not only had she had two centuries in which to practice her humanity, not only was she taking advantage of Ray's gift for storytelling, but that she had told much of it before.

For twenty-two years [she said] I inhabited Caribe bodies, most of them terribly damaged. Cripples, people with degenerative diseases, and once a young girl with a huge dent in her skull, an injury gotten during a raid. Though my energies increased the efficiency of their muscles, I endured all their agonies. But as the Caribe retreated from the island in face of the English, even this tortured existence was denied to me. I spent four years within the machine, despairing of ever leaving it again. Then, in 1819, Ezekiel Brooks stumbled onto the Burying Ground. He was a retarded boy of seventeen and had become lost in the mangrove. When his father, William, came in search of him, he found me instead. He remembered the fiery object that had fallen from the sky and was delighted to have solved a puzzle that had baffled his captain for so many years. Thereafter he visited every week and dragged old Henry Meachem along.

Meachem was in his seventies then, fat, with a doughy, wrinkled face and long gray hair done up into ringlets; he affected foppish clothes and a lordly manner. He had the gout and had to be carried through the mangrove by his slaves. They brought with them a teakwood chair, its grips carved into lion's heads, and there he'd sit, wheezing, bellowing at the slaves to keep busy with their fly whisks, plying me with questions. He did not believe my story, and on his second visit, a night much like this one, moonstruck and lightly winded, he was accompanied by a Spanish woman, a scrawny old hag enveloped in a black shawl and skirt, whom he told me was a witch.

"Sit you down with Tia Claudia," he said, prodding her forward with his cane, "and she'll have the truth of you. She'll unravel your thoughts like a ball of twine."

The old woman sat cross-legged beside the pit, pulled a lump of clouded crystal from her skirt and set it on the ground before her. Beneath the shawl her shadowed wrinkles had the look of a pattern in tree bark, and despite her apparent frailty I could feel her presence as a chill pressure on my skin. Uneasy, I sat

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down on the opposite side of the pit. Her eyelids drooped, her breath grew shallow and irregular, and the force of her life flooded me, intensifying in the exercise of her power. The fracture planes inside the crystal appeared to be gleaming with more than refracted moonlight, and as I stared at them, a drowsy sensation stole over me . . . but then I was distracted by a faint rushing noise from the pit.

Hatchworks of fine lines were etching the surface of the water, sending up sprays of mist. The patterns they formed resembled the fracture planes of the crystal. I glanced up at Tia Claudia. She was trembling, a horror-stricken expression on her face, and the rushing noise was issuing from her parted lips as though she had been invaded by a ghostly wind. The ligature of her neck was cabled, her hands were clawed. I looked back to the pit. Beneath the surface, shrinking and expanding in a faltering rhythm, was a point of crimson light. Tia Claudia's power, I realized, was somehow akin to that of the machine. She was healing it, restoring its homing capacity, and it was opening a road! Hope blazed in me. I eased into the pit, and the fields gripped me, stronger than ever. But as the old woman let out a shriek and slumped to the ground, they weakened; the point of light shrank to nothing, gone glimmering like my hope. It had only been a momentary restoration, a product of her mind joined to the machine's.

Two of Meachem's slaves helped Tia Claudia to her feet, but she shook them off and backed out of the shelter, her eyes fixed on the pit. She leaned against Meachem's chair for support.

"Well?" he said.

"Kill him!" she said. "He's too dangerous, too powerful."

"Him?" Meachem laughed.

Tia Claudia said that I was who I claimed to be and argued that I was threat to him. I understood that she was really concerned with my threat to her influence over Meachem, but I was so distressed by the lapsing of the machine's power that I didn't care what they did to me. Bathed in the silvery light, stars shining around their heads, they seemed emblematic of something—perhaps of all humanity—this ludicrous old pirate in his ruffled shirt, and, shaking her knobbly finger at him, the manipulative witch who wanted to be his master.

After that night, Meachem took me under his wing. I learned that he was an exile, outlawed by the English and obsessed with the idea of returning home, and I think he was happy to have met someone even more displaced than he. Occasionally he'd invite me to his house, a gabled building of pitch-coated boards that

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clung to a strip of iron shore east of Sandy Bay. He'd sit me down in his study and read to me for hours from his journals; he thought that—being a member of an advanced civilization—I'd have the wit to appreciate his intellect. The study was a room that reflected his obsession with England, its walls covered with Union Jacks, a riot of scarlet and blue. Sometimes, watching the flies crusting the lip of his pewter mug, his sagging face looming above them, the colors on the wall appearing to drip in the unsteady glare of the oil lamp . . . sometimes it seemed a more nightmarish environment than the Caribe's circle of fires. He'd pore over the pages, now and again saying, "Ah, here's one you'll like," and would quote the passage.

" 'Wars,' " he read to me once, " 'are the solstices of the human spirit, ushering in winter to a young man's thought and rekindling the spring of an old man's anger.' "

Every page was filled with aphorisms like that—high-sounding, yet empty of meaning except as regarded his own nature. He was the cruelest man I've ever known. A wife-beater, a tyrant to his slaves and children. Some nights he would have himself borne down to the beach, order torches lit, and watch as those who had offended him were flogged—often to the death—with stalks of withe. After witnessing one of the floggings, I considered killing him, even though such an act would have been in violation of everything I believed.

Then one night he brought another woman to the Burying Ground, a young mulatto girl named Nora Mullins.

"She be weak-minded like Ezekiel," said Meachem. "She'll make you a perfect wife."

She would have run, but his slaves herded her forward. Her eyes darted left and right, her hands fidgeted with the folds of her skirt.

"I don't need a wife," I said.

"Don't you now? Here's a chance to create your own lineage, to escape that infernal contraption of yours. Nora'll bear you a child, and if blood holds true, it'll be as witless as its parents. After Ezekiel's gone, you can take up residence in your heir." His laugh disintegrated into a hacking cough.

The idea had logic behind it, but the thought of being intimate with a member of another species, especially one whose sex might be said to approximate my own, repelled me. Further, I didn't trust his motives. "Why are you doing this?" I asked.

"I'm dyin." The old monster worked up a tear over the prospect. "Nora's my legacy to you. I've always thought it a vast irony that

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a high-flyin soul such as yourself should have been brought so low. It'll please me to think of you marooned among generations of idiots while I'm wingin off to my reward."

"This island is your reward,".I said. "Even the soul dies."

"You know that for a fact?" He was worried.

"No," I said, relenting. "No one knows that."

"Well, then I'll come back to haunt you."

But he never did.

I had intended to send Nora away after he left, but Ezekiel—though too timid to approach her sexually—found her attractive, and I didn't want to deprive him of her companionship. In addition, I began to realize how lonely I had been myself. The idea of keeping her with me and fathering a child seemed more and more appealing, and a week later, using Ezekiel's memories to rouse lust, I set out to become a family man.

What a strange union that was! The moon sailing overhead, chased by ragged blue clouds; the wind and insects and frogs combining into a primitive music. Nora was terrified. She whimpered and rolled her eyes and half-heartedly tried to fight me off. I don't believe she was clear as to what was happening, but eventually her instincts took control. It would be hard to imagine two more inept virgins. I had a logical understanding of the act, at least one superior to Nora's; but this was counterbalanced by her sluggish coordination and my revulsion. Somehow we managed. I think it was mainly due to the fact that she sensed I was like her, female in a way that transcended anatomy, and this helped us to employ tenderness with one another. Over the succeeding nights an honest affection developed between us; though her speech was limited to strangled cries, we learned to communicate after a fashion, and our lovemaking grew more expert, more genuine.

Fourteen years we were together. She bore me three children, two still-born, but the third a slow-witted boy whom we named Carl—it was a name that Nora could almost pronounce. By day she and Ezekiel were brother and sister, and by night she and I were husband and wife. Carl needed things the land couldn't provide, milk, vegetables, and these were given us by William Brooks; but when he died several years after Carl's birth, taking with him the secret of my identity, Nora began going into Sandy Bay to beg—or so I thought until I was visited by her brother Robert. I knew something must be wrong. We were the shame of the family; they had never acknowledged us in any way.

"Nora she dead," he told me. "Murdered."

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He explained that two of her customers had been fighting over her, and that when she had tried to leave, one—a man named Halsey Brooks—had slit her throat. I didn't understand. Customers? Nothing Mullins said made sense.

"Don't you know she been whorin?" he said. "Mon you a worse fool dan I think. She been whorin dese six, seven years."

"Carl," I said. "Where is he?"

"My woman takin charge of him," he said. "I come for to bring you to dis Brooks. If you ain't mon enough, den I handle it myself. Family's family, no matter how crooked de tie."

What I felt then was purely human—loss, rage, guilt over the fact that Nora had been driven to such straits. "Show him to me," I said.

Hearing the murderousness in my voice, Robert Mullins smiled.

Halsey Brooks was drinking in a shanty bar, a single room lit by oil lamps whose glass tops were so sooty that the light penetrated them as baleful orange gleams. The rickety tables looked like black spiders standing at attention. Brooks was sitting against the rear wall, a big slack-bellied man with skin the color of sun-baked mud, wearing a shirt and trousers of sailcloth. Mullins stationed himself out of sight at the door, his machete at the ready in case I failed, and I went inside.

Catching sight of me, Brooks grinned and drew a knife from his boot. "Dat little squint of yours be missin you down in Hell," he said, and threw the knife.

I twisted aside, and the knife struck the wall. Brooks' eyes widened. He got to his feet, wary; the other customers headed for the door, knocking over chairs in their haste.

"You a quick little nigger," said Brooks, advancing on me. "But quick won't help you now."

He would have been no match for me; but confronted by the actual task of shedding blood, I found that I couldn't go through with it. I was nauseated by the thought that I had even considered it. I backed away, tripped over a chair, and went sprawling in the corner.

"Dat de best you got to offer?" said Brooks, chuckling.

As he reached for me, Mullins slipped up behind and slashed him across the neck and back. Brooks screamed—an incredibly girlish sound for a man so large—and sank to his knees beside me, trying to pinch together the lips of his wounds. He held a hand to his face, seeming amazed by the redness. Then he pitched forward on top of me. The reek of his blood and sweat, just the feel of him in my hands as I started to push him away, all that

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drove me into a fury. One of his eyes was an inch from mine, half-closed and clouding over. He was dying, but I wanted to dig the last flicker of life out of him. I tore at his cheek with my teeth. The eye snapped open, I heard the beginning of his scream, and I remember nothing more until I threw him aside. His face was flayed to the muscle-strings, his nose was pulped, and there were brimming, dark red craters where his eyes had been.

"My God!" said Mullins, staring at the ruin of Brooks' head; he turned to me. "Go home! De thing more dan settled."

All my rage had drained and been replaced by self-loathing. Home! I *was* home. The island had eroded my spirit, transformed me into one of its violent creatures.

"Don't come 'round no more," said Mullins, wiping his blade on Brooks' trousers; he gave me a final look of disgust. "Get back to de damn Buryin Ground where you belong."

Cassiopeia sprang to her feet and stepped out into the clearing. Her expression was grim, and I was worried that she might have worked herself into a rage by rehashing the killing. But she only walked a few paces away. Silvered by the moonlight, she looked unnaturally slim, and it seemed more than ever that I was seeing an approximation of her original form. The snakes had grown dead-still in the trench.

"You didn't really kill him," I said.

"I would have," she said. "But never again." She kicked at a pile of conch shells and sent them clattering down.

"What happened then?"

She did not answer for a moment, gazing out toward the sound of the reef. "I was sickened by the changes I'd undergone," she said. "I became a hermit, and after Ezekiel died I continued my hermitage in Carl's body. That poor soul!" She walked a little further away. "I taught him to hide whenever men visited the Burying Ground. He lived like a wild animal, grubbing for roots, fishing with his bare hands. At the time it seemed the kindest thing I could do. I wanted to cleanse him of the taint of humanity. Of course that proved impossible . . . for both of us."

"You know," I said, "with all the technological advances these days, you might be able to contact . . ."

"Don't you think I've considered my prospects!" she said angrily; and then, in a quieter tone, "I used to hope that human science would permit me to return home someday, but I'm not sure I want to anymore. I've been perverted by this culture. I'd be as repulsive

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to my people as Ezekiel was to Robert Mullins, and I doubt that I'd be comfortable among them myself."

I should have understood the finality of her loneliness—she had been detailing it in her story. But I understood now. She was a mixture of human and alien, spiritually a half-breed, gone native over a span of two centuries. She had no people, no place except this patch of sand and mangrove, no tradition except the clearing and the snakes and a game made of broken shells. "I'm sorry," I said.

"It's not your fault, Frank," she said, and smiled. "It's your American heritage that makes you tend to enshrine the obvious."

"Ray and I aren't a fair sample," I said defensively.

"I've known other Americans," she said. "They've all had that tendency. Everyone down here thought they were fools when they first came. They seemed totally unaware of the way things worked, and no one understood that their tremendous energy and capacity for deceit would compensate. But they were worse than either the pirates or the Spanish."

Without another word, she turned and walked toward the brush.

"Wait!" I said; I was eager to hear about her experiences with Americans.

"You can come back tomorrow, Frank," she said. "Though maybe you shouldn't."

"Why not?" Then, thinking that she might have some personal reason for distrusting Americans, I said, "I won't hurt you. I don't believe I'm physically capable of it."

"What a misleading way to measure security," she said. "In terms of hurt. You avoid using the word 'kill,' and yet you kill so readily. It's as though you're all pretending it's a secret."

She slipped into the brush, moving soundlessly, somehow avoiding the dry branches, the papery fronds.

I drove all over the island the next day, trying to find a tape recorder, eventually borrowing one from a tourist in Meachem's Landing. Half-baked delusions of grandeur had been roused in me. I would be the Schliemann of extraterrestrial research, uncovering the ruin of an alien beneath the waste of a human being. There would be best-sellers, talk shows, exclamations of academic awe. Of course there was no real proof. A psychiatrist would point out how conveniently pat the story was—the machine that hid itself, the loss of memory, the alien woman conjured up by a man whose disorder stemmed from a disappointment in love. He would

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say it was the masterwork of a gifted talespinner, complete with special effects. Yet I thought that whoever heard it would hear —as I had—the commonplace perfection of truth underlying its exotic detail.

I had forgotten my original purpose for visiting the Burying Ground, but that afternoon Jimmy Mullins turned up at my door, eager to learn if I had news for him. He was only moderately drunk and had his wife Hettie in tow—a slender, mahogany-skinned woman wearing a dirty blue dress. She was careworn, but still prettier than Mullins deserved. I was busy and put him off, telling him that I was exploring something with Ray that could lead to money. And, I realized, I was. Knowing his character, I had assumed Mullins was attempting to swindle Hatfield; but Nora Mullins' common-law marriage to Ezekiel Brooks gave credence to his claim. I should have explained it to him. As it was, he knew I was just getting rid of him, and Hettie had to pull him down from the porch to cut short his arguments. My news must have given him some heart, though, because a few minutes later Hatfield knocked at the door.

"What you tellin Jimmy?" he asked. "He braggin dat you got proof de Buryin Ground his."

I denied the charge and told him what I had learned, but not how I had learned it.

"I never mean to cheat Jimmy," he said, scratching his head. "I just want to make sure he not cheatin me. If he got a case . . . well, miserable as he is, he blood."

After he left, I had problems. I found I needed new batteries for the recorder and had to drive into Meachem's Landing; and when I returned home I had an argument with Elizabeth that lasted well past sunset. As a result, I did not start out for the Burying Ground until almost ten o'clock, and while I was stowing my pack in the dory, I saw Cassiopeia walking toward me along the beach.

It was a clear night, the shadows of the palms sharp on the sand, and each time she passed through a shadow, it seemed I was seeing Ray; but then, as she emerged into the light, I would undergo a peculiar dislocation and realize that it was not Ray at all.

"I was on my way out to you," I said. "You didn't have to come into town."

"I gave up being a hermit long ago, Frank," she said. "I like coming here. Sometimes it jogs my memory to be around so many others, though there's nothing really familiar about them."

"What do you remember?"

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"Not much. Flashes of scenery, conversations. But once I did remember something concrete. I think it had to do with my work, my profession. I'll show you."

She squatted, smoothed a patch of sand, and began tracing a design. As with all her actions, this one was quick and complicated; she used three fingers of each hand, moving them in contrary directions, adding a squiggle here, a straight line there, until the design looked like a cross between a mandala and a printed circuit. Watching it evolve, I was overcome by a feeling of peace, not the drowsiness of hypnotism, but a powerful, enlivening sensation that alerted me to the peacefulness around me. The soughing of the palms, the lapping of the water, the stillness of the reef—it was low tide. This feeling was as potent as the effect of a strong drug, and yet it had none of the fuzziness that I associate with drugs. By the time she had finished, I was so wrapped in contentment that all my curiosity had abated—I was not even curious about the design—and I put aside for the moment the idea of recording her. We strolled eastward along the beach without talking, past Sarah's Store and The Chicken Shack, taking in the sights. The tin roofs of the shanties gleamed under the moonlight, and, their imperfections hidden by the darkness, the shanties themselves looked quaint and cozy. Shadows were dancing behind the curtains, soft reggae drifted on the breeze. Peace. When I finally broke the silence, it was not out of curiosity but in the spirit of that peace, of friendship.

"What about Ray?" I asked. "He was in pretty rough shape when I visited him the other afternoon."

"He's better off than he would be elsewhere," she said. "Calmer, steadier."

"But he can't be happy."

"Maybe not," she said. "But in a way I'm what he was always seeking, even before he began to deteriorate. He actually thinks of me in romantic terms." She laughed—a trilling note. "I'm very happy with him myself. I've never had a host with so few defects."

We were drawing near the New Byzantine Church of the Archangel, a small white-frame building set back from the shore. This being Friday, it had been turned into a movie theater. The light above the door illuminated a gaudy poster that had been inserted into the glass case normally displaying the subject of the sermon; the poster showed two bloodstained Chinese men fighting with curved knives. Several teenagers were silhouetted by the light, practicing martial arts kicks beside the steps—like stick figures come to life—and a group of men was watching them, passing a

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bottle. One of the men detached himself from the group and headed toward us. Jimmy Mullins.

"Mr. Milliken!" he shouted. "Dis de owner of de Buryin Ground wantin to speak with you!"

Cassiopeia spun on her heel and went wading out into the water. Infuriated, Mullins ran after her, and—myself infuriated at the interruption, this breach of peace—I stuck out a foot and tripped him. I threw myself on top of him, trying for a pin, but he was stronger than I had supposed. He wrenched an arm loose, stunned me with a blow to the head, and wriggled free. I clamped my arms around his leg, and he dragged me along, yelling at Cassiopeia.

"Pay me my money, bastard!"

"*I'll* pay you!" I said out of desperation.

It might have been a magic spell that I had pronounced. He quit dragging me; I clung to his leg with one hand, and with the other I wiped a crust of mucky sand from my mouth.

"You goin to pay me three thousand *lemps?*" he said in a tone of disbelief.

It occurred to me that he had not expected the entire amount, that he had only been hoping for a nuisance payment. But I was committed. Fifteen hundred dollars was no trifle to me, but I might be able to recoup it from Ray, and if not, well, I could make it up by foregoing my Christmas trip to the States. I pulled out my wallet and handed Mullins all the bills, about fifty or sixty *lempira.*

"That's all I've got now," I said, "but I'll get the rest in the morning. Just leave Milliken alone."

Mullins stared at the money in his hand, his little snappish eyes blinking rapidly, speechless. I stared out to sea, searching for a sign of Cassiopeia, but found none. Not at first. Then I spotted her, a slim, pale figure standing atop a coral head about fifteen yards from shore. Without taking a running start, she leaped—at that distance she looked like a white splinter being blown through the night—and landed upon another coral head some twenty, twenty-five feet away. Before I could absorb the improbability of the leap, she dived and vanished into the water beyond the reef.

"I be at your house nine o'clock sharp," said Mullins joyfully. "And we go to de bank together. You not goin to be havin no more strife with dis negro!"

But Mullins did not show up the next morning, not at nine o'clock or ten or eleven. I asked around and heard that he had

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been drinking in Spanish Harbor; he had probably forgotten the appointment and passed out beneath some shanty. I drove to the bank, withdrew the money, and returned home. Still no Mullins. I wandered the beach, hoping to find him, and around three o'clock I ran into Hettie at Sarah's Store.

"Jimmy he never home of a Saturday," she told me ruefully.

I considered giving her the money, but I suspected that she would not tell Mullins, would use it for the children, and though this would be an admirable use, I doubted that it would please Mullins. Twilight fell, and my patience was exhausted. I left a message for Mullins with Elizabeth, stashed the money in a trunk, and headed for the Burying Ground.

After mooring the dory, I switched on the recorder and secreted it in my pack. My investigative zeal of the previous day had been reborn, and not even the desolation of Port Ezekiel could dim my spirits. I had solved the ultimate problem of the retiree; I had come up with a project that was not only time-consuming but perhaps had some importance. And now that Mullins had been taken care of, nothing would interfere.

Cassiopeia was sitting beneath the shelter when I reached the clearing, a silvery star of moonlight shifting across her face from a ragged hole in the thatch. She pointed to my pack and asked, "What's that?"

"The pack?" I said innocently.

"Inside it."

I knew she meant the recorder. I showed it to her and said, "I want to document your story."

She snatched it from me and slung it into the bushes.

"You're a stupid man, Frank," she said. "What do you suppose would happen if you played a recording of me for someone? They'd say it was an interesting form of insanity, and if they could profit, or if they were driven by misguided compassion, they'd send me away for treatment. And that would be that."

For a long while afterward she would not talk to me. Clouds were passing across the moon, gradually thinning, so that each time the light brightened it was brighter than the time before, as if the clearing were being dipped repeatedly into a stream and washed free of a grimy film. Cassiopeia sat brooding over her gameboard. Having grown somewhat accustomed to her, to that strong female presence, I was beginning to be able to detect her changes in mood. And they were rapid changes, fluctuating every few seconds between hostility and sadness. I recalled her telling me that she was probably mad; I had taken the statement to be

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an expression of gloom, but now I wondered if any creature whose moods shifted with such rapidity could be judged sane. Nonetheless, I was about to ask her to continue her story when I heard an outboard motor, and, moments after it had been shut off, a man's voice shouting, "Mr. Milliken!"

It was Jimmy Mullins.

A woman's voice shrilled, unintelligible, and there was a crash as if someone had fallen; a second later Mullins pushed into the clearing. Hettie was clinging to his arm, restraining him; but on seeing us, he cuffed her to the ground and staggered forward. His town clothes were matted with filth and damp. Two other men crowded up behind Hettie. They were both younger than Mullins, slouching, dressed in rags and sporting natty dreads. One held a rum bottle, and the second, the taller, carried a machete.

"You owe me three thousand *lemps!*" said Mullins to Cassiopeia; his head lolled back, and silver dots of moonlight flared in his eyes.

"Sick of dis Yankee domination," said the taller man; he giggled. "Ain't dat right, Jimmy?"

"Jimmy," I said. "We had a bargain."

Mullins said nothing, his face a mask of sodden fury; he teetered on the edge of the trench, unaware of the snakes.

"Tired of dis exploitation," said the man, and his friend, who had been taking a pull from the bottle, elbowed him gleefully and said, "Dat pretty slick, mon! Listen up." He snapped his fingers in a reggae tempo and sang in a sweet, tremulous voice:

"Sick of dis Yankee domination,
Oh yea—aa-ay,
Tired of dis exploitation . . ."

The scenario was clear—these two had encountered the drunken Mullins in a bar, listened to the story of his windfall, and, thinking that he was being had, hoping to gain by it, they had egged him into this confrontation.

"Dis my land, and you ain't legal on it," said Mullins.

"What about our bargain, Jimmy?" I asked. "The money's back at the house."

He was tempted, but drunkenness and politics had infected his pride. "I ain't no beggar," he said. "I wants what's mine, and *dis* mon's money mine." He bent down and picked up one of the conch shells that were lying about; he curled his fingers around the inner curve of the shell—it fit over his hand like the spiked glove of a gladiator. He took a vicious swipe in our direction, and it *whooshed* through the air.

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Cassiopeia let out a hissing breath.

It was very tense in the clearing. The two men were watching Mullins with new respect, new alertness, no longer joking. Even in the hands of a fool, conch shells were serious business; they had a ritual potency. Cassiopeia was deadpan, measuring Mullins. Her anger washed over me—I gauged it to be less anger than a cold disapproval, the caliber of emotion one experiences in reaction to a nasty child. But I was ready to intervene if her mood should escalate. Mullins was a coward at heart, and I thought that he would go to the brink but no further. I edged forward, halfway between them. My mouth was cottony.

"I goin to bash you simple, and you not pay me," said Mullins, crossing over the trench.

"Listen, Jimmy . . ." I said, raising the voice of reason.

Cassiopeia lunged for him. I threw my arms around her, and Mullins, panicked, seeing her disadvantage, swung the shell. She heaved me aside with a shrug and tried to slip the punch. But I had hampered her just enough. The shell glanced off her shoulder. She gave a cawing, guttural screech that scraped a nail down the slate of my spine, and clutched at the wound.

"See dere," said Mullins to his friends, triumphant. "Dis negro take care of he own." He went reeling back over the trench, nearly tripping, and in righting himself, he caught sight of the snakes. It would have been impossible not to see them—they were thrusting frenziedly at the wire. Mullins' jaw fell, and he backed away. One of the rocks was dislodged from the screen. The snakes began to slither out, writing rippling black figures on the dirt and vanishing into the litter, rustling the dead fronds.

"Oh Jimmy!" Hettie held out a hand to him. "Have a care!"

Cassiopeia gave another of those chilling screeches and lowered into a crouch. Her torso swaying, her hands hooked. The flesh of her left shoulder was torn, and blood webbed her arm, dripping from her fingertips, giving them the look of claws. She stepped across the trench after Mullins. Without warning, the taller of the two men sprinted toward her, his machete raised. Cassiopeia caught his wrist and flipped him one-handed into the trench as easily as she might have tossed away an empty bottle.

There were still snakes in the trench.

They struck at his arms, his legs, and he thrashed about wildly, crying out; but one must have hit a vein, for the cry was sheared off. His limbs beat a tattoo against the dirt, his eyes rolled up. Slivers of iris peeped beneath the lids. A tiny *coralito* hung like a tassel from his cheek, and a yellowjaw was coiling around his

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throat; its flat head poked from the spikes of his hair. I heard a squawk, a sharp crack, and looked to the center of the clearing. The second man was crumpled at Cassiopeia's feet, his neck broken. Dark blood poured from his mouth, puddling under his jaw.

"Mr. Milliken," said Mullins, backing, his bravado gone. "I goin to make things right. Hettie she fix dat little scrape . . ."

He stumbled, and as he flung out an arm for balance, Cassiopeia leaped toward him, going impossibly high. It was a gorgeous movement, as smooth as the arc of a diver but more complex. She maintained a crouch in midair, and passing close to Mullins, she plucked the conch shell from his waving hand, fitted it to her own, and spun round to face him—all before she had landed.

Hettie began to scream. Short, piercing shrieks, as if she were being stabbed over and over.

Mullins ran for the brush, but Cassiopeia darted ahead of him and blocked his path. She was smiling. Again Mullins ran, and again she cut him off, keeping low, flowing across the ground. Again and again she let him run, offering him hope and dashing it, harrying him this way and that. The wind had increased, and clouds were racing overhead, strobing the moonlight; the clearing seemed to be spinning, a carousel of glare and shadow, and Hettie's screams were keeping time with the spin. Mullins' legs grew rubbery, he weaved back and forth, his arms windmilling, and at last he collapsed in a heap of fronds. Almost instantly he scrambled to his knees, yelling and tearing loose a snake that had been hanging from his wrist.

A *coralito*, I think.

"Ah!" he said. "Ah . . . ah!"

His stare lanced into my eyes, freezing me with its hopelessness; a slant of light grazed his forehead, shining his sweat to silver beads.

Cassiopeia walked over and grabbed a handful of his shirtfront, hoisting him up until his feet were dangling. He kicked feebly and made a piteous, bubbling noise. Then she drove the conch shell into his face. Once. Twice. Three times. Each blow splintered bone and sent a spray of blood flying. Hettie's scream became a wail. After the final blow, a spasm passed through Mullins' body—it looked too inconsequential to be death.

I was dimly aware that Hettie had stopped screaming, that the outboard motor had been started, but I was transfixed. Cassiopeia was still holding Mullins aloft, as if admiring her handiwork. His head glistened black in the moonlight, featureless and oddly misshapen. At least a minute went by before she dropped him. The

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thump of the body broke the spell that the scene had cast. I eased toward the brush.

"You can leave, Frank," she said. "I won't kill you."

I was giddy with fear, and I almost laughed. She did not turn but cocked an eye at me over her shoulder—a menacing posture. I was afraid that if I tried to leave she would hunt me through the brush.

"I won't kill you," she said again. She lowered her head, and I could feel her despair, her shame; it acted to lessen my fear.

"The soldiers will be coming," I said.

She was silent, motionless.

"You should make the exchange with Ray."

I was horrified by what she had done, but I wanted her to live. Insane or not, she was too rare to lose—a voice of mystery in all this ordinary matter.

"No more." She said it in a grim whisper. "I know it's much to ask, Frank, but will you keep me company?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. Wait for the soldiers." She inspected her wound; the blood had quit flowing. "And if they don't come before dawn, I'll watch the sunrise. I've always been curious about it."

She scarcely said a word the rest of the night. We went down to the shore and sat beside a tangle of mangrove. I tried to convince her to survive, but she warded off every argument with a slashing gesture. Toward dawn, as the first gray appeared in the east, she had a convulsion, a brief flailing of the limbs that stretched her out flat. Dawn comes swiftly on the water, and by the time she had regained consciousness, pink streaks were infiltrating the gray.

"Make the exchange," I urged her. "It's not too late, is it?"

She ignored me. Her eyes were fixed on the horizon, where the rim of the solar disc was edging up; the sea reflected a rippling path of crimson and purple leading away from it, and the bottoms of the clouds were dyed these same colors.

Ten minutes later she had a more severe convulsion. This one left a froth of bloody bubbles rimming her nostrils. She groped for my hand, and as she squeezed it, I felt my bones grinding together. My emotions were grinding together as well; my situation—like Henry Meachem's—was so similar to hers. Aliens and strangers, all of us, unable to come to grips with this melancholy island.

Shortly after her third convulsion, I heard an outboard motor.

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A dory was cutting toward us from the reef wall; it was not a large enough craft to be the militia, and as it drew near, I recognized Hatfield Brooks by his silhouette hunched over the tiller, his natty dreads. He switched off the motor and let the dory drift until he was about fifty feet away; then he dropped the anchor and picked up a rifle that had been leaning against the front seat. He set the stock to his shoulder.

"Keep clear of dere, Mr. Winship!" he called. "I can't vouch for de steadiness of my aim."

Behind him, shafts of light were spearing up through balconies of cloud—a cathedral of a sky.

"Don't, Hatfield!" I stepped in front of Cassiopeia, waving my arms. "She's . . . he's dying! There's no need for it!"

"Keep clear!" he shouted. "De mon have killed Jimmy, and I come for him!"

"Just let him die!"

"He don't just let Jimmy die! Hettie been sayin how dat crazy mon batter him!" He braced himself in the stern and took aim.

With a hoarse sigh, Cassiopeia climbed to her feet. I caught her wrist. Her skin was burning hot, her pulse drummed. Nerves twitched at the corners of her eyes, and one of the pupils was twice the size of the other. It was Ray's face I was seeing in that dawn light—hollow-cheeked, dirt-smeared, haggard; but even then I saw a sleeker shape beneath. She peeled my fingers off her wrist.

"Goodbye, Frank," she said; she pushed me away and ran toward Hatfield.

Ran!

The water was waist-deep all the way to the reef, yet she knifed through it as if it were nothing, ploughing a wake like the hull of a speedboat. It was a more disturbing sight than her destruction of Mullins had been. Thoroughly inhuman. Hatfield's first shot struck her in the chest and barely slowed her. She was twenty feet from the dory when the second shot hit, and that knocked her sideways, clawing at her stomach. The third drilled a jet of blood from her shoulder, driving her back; but she came forward again. One plodding step after another, shaking her head with pain. Four, five, six. Hatfield kept squeezing off the rounds, and I was screaming for him to finish her—each shot was a hammer-blow that shivered loose a new scream. An arm's-length from the dory, she sank to her knees and grabbed the keel, rocking it violently. Hatfield bounced side-to-side, unable to bring the rifle

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to bear. It discharged twice. Wild misses aimed at the sky, the trees.

And then, her head thrown back, arms upflung, Cassiopeia leaped out of the water.

Out of the world.

I am not sure whether she meant to kill Hatfield or if this was just a last expression of physicality—whatever her intent, she went so high that it was more a flight than a leap. Surrounded by a halo of fiery drops, twisting above the dory, her chest striped with blood, she seemed a creation of some visionary's imagination, bursting from a jeweled egg and being drawn gracefully into the heavens. But at the peak of the leap, she came all disjointed and fell, disappearing in a splash. Moments later, she floated up—face downward—and began to drift away. The sound of the reef faded in, a steady, soothing hiss. The body spun slowly on the tide; the patch of water around it was stained gold and purple, as if the wounds were leaking the colors of sunrise.

Hatfield and I stared at each other across the distance. He did not lower the rifle. Strangely enough, I was not afraid. I had come to the same conclusion as Cassiopeia, the knowledge that the years could only decline from this point onward. I felt ready to die. The soft crush of waves building louder and louder on the reef, the body drifting leisurely toward shore, the black snaky-haired figure bobbing in his little boat against the enormous flag of the sunburst—it was a perfect medium for death. The whole world was steeped in it. But Hatfield laid the rifle down. He half-raised his hand to me—an aborted salute or farewell—and held the pose a second or two; he must have recognized the futility of any gesture, for he ducked his head then and fired up the motor, leaving me to take charge of the dead.

The authorities were unable to contact Ray's family. It may be that he had none; he had never spoken of them. The local cemetery refused his remains—too many Brookses and Mullinses under the soil; and so, as was appropriate, he was laid to rest beside Ezekiel and Carl on the Burying Ground. Hatfield fled off-island and worked his passage to Miami; though he is still considered something of a hero, the tide of anti-Americanism ebbed—it was as if Ray had been a surrogate for the mercenaries and development bankers who had raped the island over the years. Once more there were friendly greetings, smiling faces, and contented shrimp-workers. As for me, I married Elizabeth. I have no illusions about the relationship; in retrospect, it seems a self-destructive move.

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But I was shaken, haunted. If I had not committed my stupidity with the recorder, if I had not thrown my arms around Cassiopeia, would she have been able to control her anger? Would she merely have disarmed Mullins? I needed the bitter enchantment of a marriage to ground myself in the world again, to obscure the answers to these questions, to blur the meaning of these events.

And what was their meaning?

Was this a traveler's tale like none other, a weaving together of starships and pirates, madmen and ghosts, into the history of an alien being and a sorry plot of mangrove? Or was it simply an extraordinary instance of psychosis, a labyrinthine justification for a young man's lack of inner strength?

I have no proof that would be measurable by any scientific rule, though I can offer one that is purely Guanojan and therefore open to interpretation—what was seen might have been an actual event or the shade of such an event, or it might have been the relic of a wish powerful enough to outlast the brain that conceived it. Witness the testimony of Donald Ebanks, a fisherman, who put in at night to the Burying Ground for repairs several months after Cassiopeia's death. I heard him tell the story at The Chicken Shack, and since it was only the third retelling, since he had only downed two rums, it had not changed character much from the original.

"I tinkerin wit de fuel line," he said, "when of a sudden dere's de sound of wind, and yet dere ain't no wind to feel. I 'ware dat dis de duppy sign, but I ain't fearful 'cause my mother she take me to Escuilpas as a child and have de Black Virgin bless me. After dat no duppy can do me harm. Still, I wary. I turn and dere dey is. Two of dem, bot' shinin pale white wit dat duppy glow dat don't 'low you to see dere trut'ful colors. One were Ray Milliken, and de other . . . God! I fall back in de boat to see it. De face ain't not'ing but teeth and eyes, and dere's a fringe 'round de head like de fringe of de anemone—snappin and twistin. And tall! Dis duppy mus' be two foot taller than Ray. Skinny-tall. Wearin somet'ing dat fit tight to it frame neck-to-toe, and shine even brighter dan de glow 'round dere bodies. Now Ray he smile and come a step to me, but dis other cotch he arm and 'pear to be scoldin him. It point behind dem, and dere, right where it pointin, some of de glow clear a spot, and de spot growin wider and wider to a circle, and t'rough de circle I'm seein creepers, trees . . . solid jungle like dey gots in Miskitia. Ray have a fretful look on he face, but he shrug and dey walks off into de circle. Not walkin proper, you understand. Dey dwindlin, and de wind dwindlin wit dem. See,

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dey not travelin over de Buryin Ground but 'pon duppy roads dat draws dem quick from de world, and dey jus' dwindlin and dwindlin 'til dey's not'ing but a speck of gleam and a whisper of wind. Den dey gone. Gone for good was de feelin I got. But where, I cannot tell you." ●

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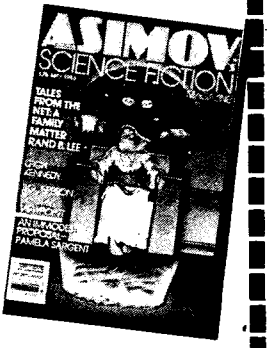

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Clay's Ark
By Octavia Butler
St. Martin's Press, $12.95

Octavia Butler is a writer who in the past few years seems well on the way to a major reputation with, paradoxically, almost no books in print. At this writing, only one of her novels is available. Her novels have been spread out among several publishers, all of whom seem to have been careless of what could well be an important young talent.

A new novel, *Clay's Ark,* will keep that rep going, if not necessarily giving it a big push. Its problem is a sin of omission, not of *commission,* of which more below.

Clay's Ark is set in one of the more depressing near futures to be encountered lately. Mayhem, lawlessness, and anarchy rule most of the country; order is maintained only in certain enclaves and, to a degree, on certain highways between—all others are taken over by "car families," outlaw bands who rob, murder, and kidnap with near impunity.

Blake Maslin and his two daughters, Keira and Rane, have attempted a car trip to see his parents—Keira is dying of leukemia. On the road, they are kidnapped by what they think to be representatives of a "car family"—two men and a woman—but there is an odd quality to these people, and the Maslins are taken to what seems to be a self-sufficient commune in the hills (the locale is the Southwest).

The chapters of Blake's story alternate with flashback chapters on the establishment of the "commune." Earth's first interstellar expedition has crash landed nearby and there is one survivor. The crash has occurred probably by design of those on board; they have picked up a parasitic disease on Proxi Two which has turned out to be worse than deadly. Those that don't die from it are changed physiologically, compelled by biochemical urges that are as strong or stronger than sexual (and akin to sexual) to transmit the parasites to other humans. There are also other physical changes, primarily sensory enhancement: ability to see in the

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dark, sharpened hearing, and astonishingly fast repair of bodily injuries.

The one survivor gives the disease to the ranch family whom he first encounters; they endeavor to maintain themselves in a sort of self-imposed quarantine, but inevitably others wander in. And the demands of the disease make recruitment necessary. Children begin to be born in the community, and they are not totally human.

The situation reveals itself as we alternate between the two stories; the tension arises as Blake's family, already infected, still attempts to escape—Blake is a doctor, and he remains convinced that some other way can be found than the imperfect quarantine set up by those infected. Keira's leukemia, however, is almost immediately cured.

Butler is a skilful writer; the pace and characterization in *Clay's Ark* are well handled, suspense is maintained throughout, and one's sympathies veer widely with the complications of the situation. The problem is simply that there's not *enough*; given the complex premise that the author has established, there's material here for a novel of twice the length. The book runs a bare 200 pages, and at the end, despite a good deal of action, at least one reader felt that he had been short changed. The climax is too rapid, and unsatisfactory in leaving a lot implied rather than told.

This is in a sense a tribute to Butler's skill and originality. There aren't *too* many books that one wants more of.

The Practice Effect
By David Brin
Bantam, $2.75 (paper)

The surprise best seller of last summer was David Brin's *Startide Rising*, a science fiction novel in the classic Campbellicose tradition of the Golden Age (albeit thoroughly modernized). Now Brin shifts gears; his new novel is much lighter and bouncier, drifting toward the fantasy end of the spectrum, a balloon to *Startide's* jet. (Balloons, in fact, play a major role in the story.)

Dennis Nuel, a young academic researcher, has been working on the zievatron, a machine that searches for and makes contact with anomalous worlds. It has indeed found one, from which have come living creatures, but something seems to have gone wrong on the other end of the gate; not even the robot probes sent through have returned. So Dennis volunteers to go through on an explore-and-repair mission.

What he finds on the other side is a pastoral, feudal world populated by humans who speak a language suspiciously close to English. There are wicked Bar-

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ons, lovely Princesses, and medieval-type cities. But there are also some very odd fauna and even odder natural laws, mainly that which gives the novel its title, *The Practice Effect.*

It seems that inanimate objects improve, rather than deteriorate, with use. In other words, if you knock together a crude, stone age quality axe and keep using it, it will eventually become better, in form as well as function, and you end up with a better-than-steel object that will cut through anything.

Now this seems a fairly uninteresting gimmick on which to build a world, but the concomitants that Brin finds in it are astonishingly varied, and their effects on the society of Tatir, as this world is called, and Dennis's adventures, which can only be called rollicking, are legion.

I'll leave it up to the reader to discover them—that's half the fun of the novel—only citing a couple as examples. Some of the cloth bandages used in hospitals are hundreds of years old; they've become the perfect bandage through use. And the wealthy choose their servants for their closeness in physical build so that the servants can wear their clothes into splendor; they go from homespun to *haute couture* with use. What happens when Dennis starts knocking together crude balloons and other Earthly inventions can be imagined.

Plot ingredients are pretty standard—Dennis gains a reputation as a wizard, picks up a sidekick who is, of course, a thief, fights the Baron and his wicked men, and saves the Princess and her beleaguered people. It's all really a hook to hang the inventive premises on, and, as such, rolls along just fine.

Very early in, the old SF hand will begin to get a strong sense of *deja vu* and de Camp and Pratt's Harold Shea stories will start coming to mind. (See below for a notice of the fortuitous reprinting of these classic tales.) This is no accident; Brin makes deliberate reference to them at least twice, once with an evocation of that immortal line which will forever stick with anyone who has read them—"Yngvi is a louse!" Brin has rendered a graceful *homage* to these first-of-a-kinds. There is also a delicious little incident where he recalls one of the great moments of SF history, the one in which John Carter first lays eyes on the incomparable Dejah Thoris in *A Princess of Mars.*

If the humor throughout is a little collegiate (the chapters are all headed with bilingual puns such as "Ballon d'Essai" and "Eurekaargh!"), and there is perhaps, as in *Startide*, some repetitiveness (one too many

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chases and awakenings in dungeons), the high spirits and inventiveness of the idea more than compensate.

The Green Futures of Tycho
By William Sleator
Bantam, $2.25 (paper)
Fireball
By John Christopher
Tempo, $2.25 (paper)

Many science fiction readers are unaware that there is a whole subworld of SF being published under their very noses, and that is the field of juvenile and YA (young adult) SF, much of it by names the "adult" reader has never heard of. A lot of this is simplistic, or a rehash of ideas better told before, but there is also a fair amount which is of interest. Juvenile fiction these days certainly has a surprising sophistication, sometimes even surprising cruelty; there is also a satisfaction in a good idea well handled and briefly told, and getting back to basics can be refreshing. I took a chance on two recent ones.

The Green Futures of Tycho by William Sleator is an interesting example. The hero, Tycho Tithonus, is in early adolescence; the book is short and the basic ideas aren't new. Nevertheless, there is a nightmarish quality to the story that would be hard to capture on an adult level.

Tycho finds an artifact that enables him to time-travel. After a few short hops that create chaos in his excessively unpleasant family (three smug and bossy older siblings), he goes further into his own past once and into his future several times. What he finds is not only dismaying, but utterly confusing, since it isn't consistent.

Tycho isn't stupid, but he isn't much used to abstract thinking, and only slowly does the concept of variable futures occur to him, and that he is changing things by his very knowledge of them. (It is subtly left to the reader to spot the changes made by his trip to the past.) As his future self gets progressively more horrifying, Tycho must do something or face the future. Certainly a good premise for a time travel book for young people, and not bad reading for grown-ups.

Choosing a juvenile by John Christopher was hardly taking a chance; he made a name for himself as one of the world-destroying British authors of the 1950s (*No Blade of Grass* et al). For over a decade now he has devoted himself to writing juveniles, and they have been excellent; a bit chill, perhaps, but crisp, clear, and exciting.

The latest is *Fireball* and in *my* adolescence I would have described it as "neat." Two teenaged boys, one American, one English, are picked up by

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something that looks like ball lightning and deposited—elsewhere. They are almost immediately separated in this unfamiliar place; we follow the English boy, Simon, as he is sold into slavery—he decides he has been thrown into the past of Imperial Rome, since the language is Latin, and he is purchased by a gladiatorial school.

But his knowledge of the past is imperfect, and it is only on being reunited with the American, Brad, that he becomes aware that he is in an alternate history, in which the apostate emperor, Julian, lived to rule a full reign, fully restored paganism after a Christian interlude, and established a Roman Empire so strong that it lasted, strong but stagnant, for two millennia longer than in our time stream.

Simon and Brad are the inadvertent originators of a Christian revolt (Christianity still exists, but its practitioners are second-class citizens) which succeeds because of two very simple devices—the stirrup and the longbow—introduced by Brad, who realized their importance in our history. But the results of the revolution are unexpected, to say the least (particularly to anyone brought up on children's books in which Christianity was never questioned).

It's a terse, exciting tale, and a swell way to learn an obscure bit of history by extrapolating its alternative; I know more than few adults who could use that sort of education.

Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus
By Mary Shelley
Dodd, Mead & Co., $14.95

Depend on the female to bring a new viewpoint to things; this will be regarded as a compliment or a slur, depending on the point of view. In any case, the youthful Mrs. Mary Shelley has published an unnerving novel which might just start a trend. The young woman is the daughter of one famous (or infamous) writer, Mary Wollstonecraft (whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* stirred a great controversy some years ago) and the wife of another, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus is the story of a young scientist, Victor Frankenstein, whose ambition it is to create life by vivifying a creation made up of the bits and pieces of corpses. His ultimate success and the terrible retribution wreaked on his family, betrothed, and himself by the unfortunate creature thus unleashed is the substance of the tale, and it is indeed a frightening one. Mrs. Shelley tells it well; the suspense, as the terrible *thing* follows Victor across the map of Europe and even to the Arctic wastes, is well nigh

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unbearable (though at times the authoress becomes self-indulgent and spends too much space on describing the scenery).

Mrs. Shelley has been quoted as saying that "the event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment," and indeed, she has not given us a supernatural story of ghosts or a fantasy of wizards and sorcery, but a thriller based on the new ideas of science and progress from the Continent that have so stirred the intellectuals of all lands in the past few decades. She may even have created a new genre of literature if the idea catches on, unlikely as that may be; it might be called "science fiction" if such an epithet not be a contradiction in terms.

Whether or not such an unlikely trend manifests itself, *Frankenstein* itself will undoubtedly be popular; perhaps it will even, as its subtitle suggests, enter our culture as a new myth, and the name Frankenstein will have meaning to those who have never read the book.

(Contemporary readers will be interested in the fact that this new edition has illustrations by Berni Wrightson; they are stylistically reminiscent of the horror comics of the 1950s, which will delight some and repel others—among whom I would think might be Mary Shelley. There is also a trade paperback of this edition available, and a deluxe limited edition.)

The Compleat Enchanter
By Fletcher Pratt and
L. Sprague de Camp
Del Rey, $2.95 (paper)

See the above review of David Brin's new novel to confirm the classic status of the Harold Shea stories by Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp. They have fortunately been reprinted for those who have had the misfortune to miss them. Briefly, Shea is a just slightly inept academic who invents the "syllagismobile" by which, using logical formulae, he can enter other continua, all of which are based on myth and literature of the past. Accompanied by a pompous fellow academician, he visits the worlds of Norse mythology and Spenser's "Faerie Queene," among others.

Shea, with his knowledge of Earthly logic, can accomplish "magic" in these worlds, but the results are unpredictable; misplacing a decimal point, for instance, results in conjuring up one hundred dragons (for some reason, herbivorous).

There have been all too many stories like this since they were first published (in the 1940s), but these were the great originals.

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(Note: sorting out the various permutations in which the Shea stories have appeared takes more space than available here, but the "Compleat Enchanter" is not complete. There are two orphaned Shea stories unavailable in the U.S., "The Green Magician" and "Wall of Serpents.")

Shoptalk . . . Some months ago (some weeks, as I write, but it takes a while to get into print), an article appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, which specializes in semi-popularizing important, controversial sociological issues, on the comparatively recent mass readership (and viewership) of science fiction and fantasy. The author is Kathleen Agena, a contributing editor of *The Partisan Review*, and her thesis is that this popularity is just short of being a symptom of the decline and fall of Western civilization. It's just the sort of thesis to make aficionados froth at the mouth; on the other hand, there were valid points made. And there is a difference between a readership of a small group of devotees, and the sort of mass market, pop flood in which we find ourselves nowadays, which even unnerves some of us insiders. I hope that one of the SF journals will reprint the piece, for the edification of non-Times readers . . . Underwood/Miller, the small specialty press, has published two handsome, illustrated bibliographies: *Amber Dreams* devoted to the works of Roger Zelazny (compiled by Daniel J. H. Levack, $8.95); and *DeCamp* (compiled by Charlotte Laughlin, $9.95).

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Vacation time is here, and there are lots of con(vention)s coming up. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273–6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number. I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons, give your name & reason for calling first off. Send a #10 SASE when writing. Look for me behind the Filthy Pierre badge at cons.

JUNE, 1984

8–10—**XCon.** For info, write: **Box 7, Milwaukee WI 53201.** Or phone: **(414) 445–5797** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Oconomowoc WI (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Olympia Resort & Spa. Guests will include: R. Asprin, Jo Clayton, W. Tucker, artist R. Morrill.

21–24—**DeepSouthCon, c/o Koch, 835 Chattanooga Bank Bldg., Chattanooga TN 37402. (404) 767–7360.** J. Vinge, K. E. Wagner, fan J. Page, T. Sturgeon, S. Sucharitkul, T. Sullivan, M. Bishop, A. J. Offutt (John Cleve). Many more authors, artists, editors at this, the big annual Southern con.

29–July 2—**Inconjunction, Box 24403, Indianapolis IN 46224.** Joe Haldeman, W. A. (Bob) Tucker.

29–July 3—**WesterCon, Box 16155, Portland OR 97216. (503) 761–8768.** Harlan Ellison, artist Alex Schomburg, Ed Bryant, fans F. M. & E. Busby. Masquerade. This is the big annual Western con.

JULY, 1984

13–15—**MapleCon, Box 3156, Sta. D, Ottawa ON K1P 6H7.** Larry (Ringworld) Niven, Richard Pini.

13–15—**Spokon, 2924 N. Argonne, Spokane WA 99206.** At the Davenport Hotel. No more on this yet.

20–22—**UniCon, Box 263, College Park MD 20740.** Silver Spring MD (near Washington DC). G. Wolfe.

20–22—**RiverCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40258.** A. J. Offutt (John Cleve), C. L. Grant.

20–22—**OKon, Box 4229, Tulsa OK 74159.** Stephen Donaldson, C. J. Cherryh, James P. Hogan, W. A. (Bob) Tucker, Robert Asprin, Robert (Buck) & Juanita Coulson, Victoria Wheeler, Warren Norwood Jr.

20–23—**AlbaCon, % Nelson, 62 Campsie Rd., Wishaw ML2 9QG, UK.** Glasgow, Scotland. Harlan Ellison. Traditional, print-SF-oriented con, now in its 9th year (vs. more media-oriented FairCon, below).

27–29—**Archon, Box 50125, St. Louis MO 63105.** L. S. deCamp, C. J. Cherryh, artist J. Gaughan.

AUGUST, 1984

30–Sep. 3—**LACon 2, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. WorldCon '84. Join now for $50.

AUGUST, 1985

22–26—**AussieCon 2, Box 428, Latham NY 12110 USA.** Melbourne, Australia. The WorldCon for 1985.

30–Sep. 28—**Lone Star Con, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** The North American SF Interim Con for 1985 (NASFIC's are held only in years when WorldCon is outside North America). 3000 fans expected.

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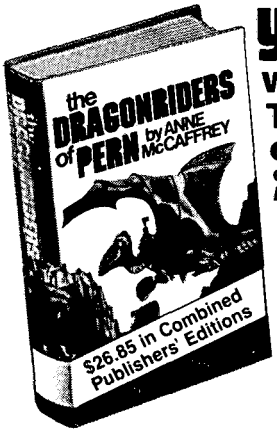

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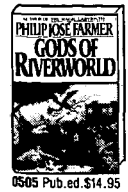

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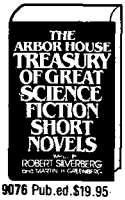

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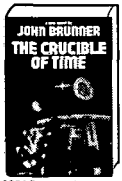

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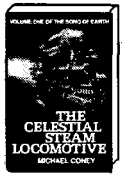

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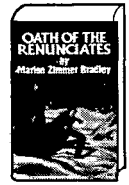

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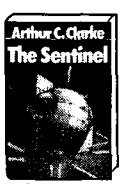

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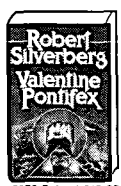

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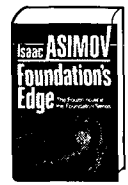

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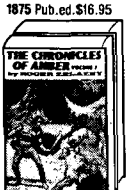

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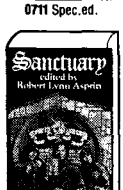

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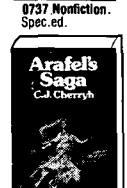

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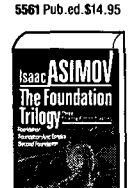

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